Time for and timing in social work with vulnerable families

Responding to needs in neoliberal times

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Timing care in social work with vulnerable families: Responding to needs in neoliberal times

Abstract

In Denmark, neoliberalism has translated into an intensified focus on economic productivity and cost-effectiveness. The notion is that it should be possible to create more and better welfare for the same or less resources. Innovation focuses on how to gain and win time despite having less time to do social work and on the potentiality of fostering individual change more effectively. The research question in this article is: In the context of current governmental focus on economic productivity and cost-effectiveness, what is the time for care in social work with vulnerable children and their families and how does this connect to the attention to needs and the timing of care? The article is part of a three year Danish research project involving ethnographic field studies closely following and observing how social workers practice and reflect on the forms and possibilities for care across statutory social casework, home based counselling and family treatment. Findings show that social workers' knowledge and skills are employed in, rather than eliminated from, the governance of vulnerable families and that a governmental emphasis on economic considerations and cost-effectiveness affects the timing of care and weighs heavily when social workers interpret, prioritise, and respond to needs.

Introduction

The general aim of social work is to promote future human wellbeing, inclusion as well as social cohesion, change and development through the empowerment and liberation of people. Based on principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities, social work is a practice-based profession that engages people in processes of change that are sensitive to people's past and present life (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014; Lorenz, 2006; Parton & Kirk, 2010). The possibility of creating change beyond what is presently imaginable, then, is at the heart of social work. In this sense, care and time are fundamental aspects of social work (Andersson, 2007; Christensen, 1997; Nissen, 2019; Stranz, 2013). Care and time are pertinent issues in social work research (Astvik, Melin, & Allvin, 2013; Olsson & Sundh, 2019) not least in times of neoliberalism where welfare reductionism and individual reponsibilisation are promoted (Fallov & Blad, 2018). It is particularly relevant in working with vulnerable families who for long periods have been dependent on the social protection system and who may be in need of long time care. From research on child protection in Denmark, we know that caring for and keeping children safe depends on establishing relationships with the family based on mutual trust. This requires time, resources and thus governmental, organisational, and professional backup enabling contact and immersion into the lives of the families through a complex socio-material infrastructure of care involving social caseworkers and home based social work (Engen et al., 2019; Fallov & Nissen, 2018).

This article is concerned with relations of time and care in the context of professional social work with vulnerable children and their families in Denmark. The research question in this article is: In the context of current governmental focus on economic productivity and cost-effectiveness, what is the time for care in social work with vulnerable children and their families and how does this connect to the attention to needs and the timing of care? Based on this, how can care be understood as a vantage point for a proactive form of resistance to neoliberal agendas?

First, I account for the notions of care and time in social work and present international research on neoliberalism and its local Danish translation in social work. Next, I explain the research design. Third, I present the analysis of two cases exemplifying two significant organisational and professional translations of neoliberal ideology. The analysis focuses on how neoliberal inspired governmental conceptions of time affect social workers' interpretations of and their responses to needs and, conversely, how attention to needs affect time horizons the timing of care in social work. Based on this, I discuss care as a proactive form of resistance that may move social work beyond neoliberal agendas. This entails that care is more than a reactive notion in opposition to neoliberalism and rather a re-articulation of social work's first voice (Dybicz, 2012).

Care and time in social work

Care ethics is committed to a relational ontology, which implies that 'relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence' (Robinson, 2011:12). From this perspective, dependence is not in opposition to individual autonomy, as implied in neoliberalist ideology. The need for care is understood not as a sign of dependence but as a sort of

prosthesis that permits one to be independent, as Kittay (2011) puts it. Care is a holistic concept pertaining to the possibilities for seeing, understanding and recognising needs as well as selecting means, strategies and ways of responding to needs (Phillips, 2007). A defining aspect of care is that the other's needs are the starting point for what must be done (Tronto, 1993). An authentically caring response is unique and individualized. It requires understanding the particularities of the other's experience, including their history and relationships, the relative power between care provider and care receiver, as well as the political context (Engster & Hamington, 2015).

As Tronto (1993) observes, care is fraught with conflict. Care givers and care receivers may have different ideas about needs and how to respond to them. Family members' needs may conflict with each other and child protection services may have altogether different institutional and political priorities. The distribution of attention to different sets and levels of needs in situations of conflict is embedded in relations of power (Nissen & Engen, 2021) and resolving conflicting needs involves balancing immediate needs with long-term needs. Care, then, is a contextual practice rather than a decoupled doctrine or a set of rules or moral principles. Caring well involves thoughtfulness, deliberation, and good judgment and it requires self-knowledge, adequate resources, and knowledge of the situation in which one cares (Tronto, 2018).

It has been argued that care does not fit well with neoliberalist aspirations for managerialism, standardisation, cost-effectiveness and welfare service reductionism. Care tends to be time consuming (Tronto, 2013) as well as hard to measure, quantify, and plan due to its unpredictability and relational, context dependent and subjective character (Christensen, 1997; Davies, 1989, 1996). Andersson (2007) concludes that research in care tend to focus on lack of time and the stress that lack of time puts on social workers. The problems associated with time such as stress, lack of time, shortage of staff and resources come to occupy a position as enemies of social work, it is argued. However, as Olsson & Sundh (2019: 693) remark in passing 'social work is not just a matter of time; it is also a matter of timing. It is not just the question of doing the right things but also doing the right thing at the right time'. Time, then, is both a structural condition of social work and an inherent aspect of responding to needs. This calls for more nuanced and complex accounts of time grounded in actual care activities, thereby bringing practices and theories of care into closer conversation.

Time can be conceived of as a social construction of temporality understood as the relation between past, present and future that is related to social organisation and thus a social construction with social consequences (Moe, 2010; Nissen, 2019). It provides structure to action and allows the conception of social intervention and the objectives to be achieved in view of a temporally constructed situation. In this perspective, time is always a time in situation, considering the actors involved, the characteristics of the situations, and the current social policies. Differentiated systems understand and master time differently and from their particular perspectives and with relative strength and power (Moe, 2010). Conceptions of time anchored in a governmental focus on cost-effectiveness, for example, may overrule vulnerable families' own understandings of time. The clients' subjective experience of time as more or less worthwhile and meaningful, however, is important for ensuring social change and closely related to the feeling of control over time. In the context of unemployment services, Nielsen, Danneris and

Monrad (2021) show that uncertainty and a loss of control reinforce an experience of stagnation. For clients experiencing temporal agency, however, wait time is experienced as meaningful and even useful. Thus, it is important that constructions of time in social work is founded in clients' understanding of time.

Working as intermediaries between society and vulnerable or excluded families (Philp, 1979), social workers negotiate between different perceptions of time and needs. For example, social workers may try to extend time buying more time to themselves and vulnerable families by negotiating between solutions offered by welfare institutions and vulnerable people's needs. This requires flexible governmental time horizons that are sensitive towards social workers' interpretations of vulnerable people's needs. The negotiation and construction of time, then, is related to the contextual practices involved in recognising and responding to needs and, therefore, the timing of care.

Neoliberalist translations in social work

Neoliberalism has transformed our understanding of social welfare and social work practices. The wealth of publications dedicated to this, attests to the commonality of neoliberalism as well as its global reach and impact (see e.g. Fallov & Blad, 2018; Hall & Lamont, 2013; Kamali & Jönsson, 2018; Spolander et al., 2014; Wallace & Pease, 2011). At its most generic level, neoliberalism can be understood as a political ideology promoting market deregulation and social service reductionism aiming at expanding labour market participation and individual responsibility. In social work, this has translated into an increase in managerialism, standardisation, risk assessment, and technical solutions (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Research suggests that social workers' conventional skills and knowledge are devalued and replaced with requirements of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Dustin, 2007). Moreover, the relationships between social workers and clients are transformed according to interpersonal relationships founded on market individualism reducing the capacity of social workers to critically address and support people in need (Singh & Cowden, 2009). However, we should be cautious of over-generalized analyses of neoliberalism and its effects. Neoliberalism is not a universal or uniform doctrine and effects and responses vary widely depending on geographical, national, historical, political and practice contexts (Fallov & Blad, 2018; Hall & Lamont, 2013).

Denmark is along with its Scandinavian neighbours considered a social democratic welfare state with strong institutions, universal welfare provision and a strong relationship between the state, the market, and the public (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Neoliberalism and social democratic welfare states tend to be framed as opposites, but the relation between the two is not straightforward and neither is the neoliberal impact. Despite decades of neoliberal influence promoting welfare retrenchment, government expenditures in Denmark on social protection including family and children services, understood according to the international Classification of the Functions of Government has doubled from 1996 to 2020 (Danmarks Statistik, 2021). However, evidence suggests that resources are not necessarily spent to ensure direct contact with and immersion into the lives of the families but on bureaucratic control and management. Thus, time spent on paperwork and documentation generated by market operations and related to budgetary controls has increased, while time spent with clients has decreased (Postle, 2001, 2002; Ringkøbing-Skjern, 2017; The Danish Association of Social Workers, 2008, 2011).

Exploring the intricate relations between neoliberalism and the Danish social democratic welfare state, Nissen (2017) argues that the latter always has promoted certain responsibilities and potentials for inclusion of the productive citizen and that neoliberalism primarily has resulted in a narrow interpretation of productivity in strict economic and individualistic terms. There is an increasing governmental emphasis on economic productivity and cost-effectiveness, which translates into efforts to mobilize and utilize undiscovered resources – not only in the life and social network of citizens but also in the everyday practices of social work (Nissen, 2019; Nissen, Fallov & Ringø, 2018). Municipalities are encouraged to invest in methods that works and to discard ineffective services, organise social services as temporary pit-stops and to identify alternatives to expensive long-term out-of-home placement (Nissen, forthcoming). The notion is that it should be possible to create more and better welfare for the same or less resources including time. Thus, innovation becomes centred on how to gain and spend time despite having less time to do social work and on the potentiality of fostering individual change more effectively. As a result, organisations are increasingly orientated towards future potentialities (Andersen & Pors, 2016; Jørgensen & Ringø, 2018) potentially subordinating social workers' experiences and expectations to fictional expectations or imaginaries (Nissen, 2019).

Research design and methods

The article presents findings from a Danish research project: 'Does Social Work Care? Exploring the relational, emotional and embodied practices in social services for vulnerable children and their families'. The project is conducted as an ethnographic field study closely following and observing how social workers in situ and in context practice and reflect on the forms and possibilities for care across three types of social work: statutory social casework, home based counselling and family treatment. The ambition is to disclose general phenomena and mechanisms in all their contextual complexities (Hansen & Ingemann, 2016). The field study is based in two Danish municipalities, which have been selected strategically as paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that are regarded as prime examples of current governmental focus on cost-effectiveness and related forms of performance management and of caring social work practices with vulnerable children and their families.

Inspired by institutional ethnographic fieldwork (Smith, 2006) and mobile methods that focus on participating in social practices and patterns of movement (Czarniawska, 2018; Ferguson, 2014) the research team applied a range of different qualitative methods to capture care practices in their full complexity and detail including informal and embodied processes and practices often left out of sight. The research team conducted participant observations by shadowing or following social workers as they move around between scenes and practices including home visits, supervised visitation, therapeutic sessions, official meetings with families, colleagues and external partners, and informal talks with colleagues. Based on field notes and audio recordings the research team created detailed and thick descriptions of social work encounters with children and families in situ. The research team interviewed social workers and, to a lesser extent, family members about their experiences on the spot as well as conducted reflective follow-up interviews with social workers. We collected policy documents, work descriptions, case notes and files and, finally, conducted focus-group interviews with social workers to capture group reflections about the possibilities of care and care practices in social

work. A written form of consent was obtained by all participating social workers and families. Most often, the families' consent was retrieved by the participating social workers in advance. However, since the researchers followed social workers in their daily routines not all encounters with families were planned. In cases of unplanned encounters with families, the researchers retrieved consent directly from the participating families. We analysed the empirical data using an abductive approach, which seeks to develop new knowledge through empirical and theoretical synthesis. An abductive analysis may start from initial concepts or frameworks and discover new empirically grounded patterns that may contribute to refining or developing initial theories and concepts (Blaikie, 2007).

Analysis: Responding to needs and timing care

Across local variations, we have identified two significant organisational and professional translations of a neoliberal ideology in social work with vulnerable families (Jørgensen, Engen, & Nissen, forthcoming; Nissen & Engen, 2021):

1) Targeted and strictly structured collaborations with parents focused on protecting children and promoting parental responsibility and self-sufficiency as fast as possible.
2) Holistic and long-term collaborations with families focused on children and parents' needs in order to avoid costly out-of-home placement.

The analysis in this article is divided into two sections based on two cases exemplifying the two types of translations. The first case is a four-year social investment programme aiming at ensuing long-lasting effects through a limited period of intense social work. The second case exemplifies long lasting and close collaboration with families focused on children's and parents' needs. Apart from having complex social problems, the families in the two cases have been dependent on social services for a long time – some for 20 years or more. In that sense, the two cases can be considered extreme cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of governmental expectations of cost-effective and efficient social work with families with long histories of dependency.

The social investment programme

In 2017 the local government in one of the participating municipalities decides to implement a four year joint social investment programme between the child and family services and the unemployment services. The overall aim is to make families that for long periods have not benefitted from the ordinary welfare services, completely or partially independent of welfare services by empowering the families and working with parents as role models for their children. The programme is evaluated on employment rate, school attendance, number of referrals, number of cases closed or opened and the municipality's total expenses in relation to the participating families. Instead of treating unemployment and family problems separately and from distinct departments, the participating families are approached as a unity with a complex of interrelated problems. The social workers in the programme work with approximately five families each. In comparison, The Danish Association of Social Workers recommends that full-time social workers have a caseload of 20 to 30 families. The social workers work closely with the families, coordinate efforts and initiatives across various welfare agencies involved with the families to ensure that all interventions relate to the family as a whole and in accordance

with a holistic family plan. The social workers are as much at home with the families as in the office and they participate in various out-of-house activities such as conversations with doctors, schools, and potential employers. According to the programme manager, the programme must provide the 'glue between all the small cracks and holes' and the social workers' task is to 'step into the families, support them and show them that we care for them' (Interview, Programme manager, August 12, 2019). The programme exemplifies that neoliberalist influence does not necessarily result in welfare retrenchment per se. Rather, the municipalities invest in supposedly effective methods expecting a quick return on investment.

Neoliberal imaginary expectations

The programme explicitly states that social change is to be brought about by greater immersion into the lives of the families emphasising close relationships between social workers and families as well as knowledge of and sensitivity towards complex and interrelated social problems. The social investment strategy and rationale behind the programme is that intense and close collaboration between vulnerable families and social workers over the course of four years can empower the families and hereby initiate long lasting changes no matter the nature of past, present, and future problems the families might face. The goal, in other words, is to make the families independent of welfare benefits within four years. The social workers in the programme, however, are sceptic towards this expectation because they, over time, come to know of additional problems within the families. As the following empirical excerpts from my field notes illustrate, holistic ambitions potentially conflict with the programme's expected return on investment.

> Asra is a single mom to four teenagers, who was initially referred to the programme because of a concern that she could not take care of her 15-year-old daughter Asreen, who has severe autism, and because she has been unemployed since she came to Denmark from Iran in 1999. Louise, the social worker working with Asra, however, tells that the family faces plenty other problems. Asra's 17-year-old daughter, Sindra, is dating a presumed ISIS sympathiser currently under investigation by the local anti-radicalisation authorities. Moreover, Asra feels excluded by the local Muslim community because of her marital status, why she feels very alone, always closes the curtains facing the street, and hardly leaves the terraced house to avoid prying and judgemental eyes. "Shouldn't I worry about that? Of course, I should! It matters to Asra and ultimately to Asreen's wellbeing", Louise says. (Field notes, August 19, 2019)

Changes may be natural and integral to a normal course of life as when children become teenagers and start dating. Needs, however, may also come to light or interpretations may change as social workers gain insight into families' life worlds, for example, when Louise learns about the social consequences of Asra's marital status or the problematic issues associated with Sindra's boyfriend. What Louise thinks of as a realistic time horizon depends on and is sensitive towards her interpretations of the family's needs, which may change and evolve over time. Sensitivity towards changing needs is implied by the programme in the sense that it enables immersion into the lives of families. The expectation that the programme can initiate long-lasting effects within four years, however, is based on an imaginary that disregards the potential consequences of gaining knowledge of the families' complex needs and dependencies. Thus,

governmental expectations of efficiency and cost-effectiveness and an increased orientation towards future potentialities (Andersen & Pors, 2016; Jørgensen & Ringø, 2018; Nissen, 2019) risk marginalising the social workers' experiences and knowledge.

Governmental expectations influencing interpretations of and responses to needs

On the one hand, the programme enables the immersion into the lives of the participating families facilitating caring responses that are based on the families' needs (Tronto, 1993). On the other hand, the expected results is based on a narrow interpretation of productivity in strict economic and individualistic terms that emphasises labour market participation. This becomes evident, as the programme's midway evaluation draws near and economic considerations and employment rates gain significance. The social workers increasingly interpret needs in terms of employment, frame employment initiatives as viable solutions to social problems and change tactics aiming at finding employment opportunities. The management is pushing for 'black numbers on the bottom line', Louise explains (Field notes, August 19, 2019). Black numbers in this particular context is understood as employment. The programme manager explains:

> We would like the parents to get a job but some of them cannot, they will never get a job…. I have tried to explain the decision makers that figures and numbers – well that is one thing. The challenge is that the Job Centre now wants more numbers, right. Then we are under pressure again, because we have not quite delivered the target figures that were expected. (Interview, Programme manager, August 12, 2019)

The pressure resulting from this particular focus may affect the way social workers approach the families and the timing of various initiatives. Charlotte, a social worker in the programme explains how she has changed tactics from 'shielding families from employment requirements and give them time and space' to 'working more structured towards getting an internship' (Field notes, September 23, 2019). While there is no easy answer to why Charlotte believes that this is the right time to change tactics, a likely explanation is that the social workers increasingly comply with management interests and neoliberal interpretations of productivity in strict economic terms. Charlotte herself relates her increased employment focus to the mid-term evaluation and to the management's focus:

> We have an increased focus on internships right now due to the mid-term evaluation and due to the management focus. I certainly think so. I do not think we can free ourselves from that. (Field notes, September 23, 2019)

Compliance, however, does not necessarily entail agreement and social workers find themselves in a dilemma; On the one hand, they think in employment opportunities. On the other hand, they worry that hastened solutions can have negative consequences in the long run. During a team meeting, for example, the social workers and the programme manager discuss the potentials and timing of internships. With regard to the case of Rita, a single mom who has been dependent on social benefits for 20 years, the programme manager argues: 'Now we will focus on employment. Now is the time to seize the opportunity' (Field notes, August 13, 2019). The team agrees that an internship might be a possible solution. But they worry about the tim-

ing arguing that Rita 'is a vacuum and low on care herself' and therefore not ready to take responsibility for an internship. Moreover, if the internship is stopped prematurely because of this, they worry she will experience this as yet another failure reducing her already low self-esteem and self-efficacy.

The midway evaluation indicated an increase in participation in leisure activities and a decrease in school absenteeism and referrals. Expenses related to the participating families, however, had not reduced and there were no indications that this would change in the future. Based on this, the local government stopped the programme prematurely. This suggests that returns on investments are understood strictly in economic terms and that other concerns, though they may be of great importance to vulnerable families, yield to economic considerations. Moreover, the case illustrates an impatience towards economic returns on investments and the potential consequences of this. Families that are not able to become economically independent within imaginary time horizons are in risk of being considered a waste of investment and time.

Negotiating time horizons in tong-term collaboration

The second case is a case of long-term collaborations with families focused on children's and parents' needs. Management focuses on including families' social networks and resources in solutions aiming at avoiding costly out-of-home placements and creating 'everyday lives that the families can manage on their own and that they thrive in', as one social worker puts it (Interview, Karen & Jenna, December 7, 2020). This includes continuous negotiation between social workers, families, and management of time horizons in relation to needs and budgets. These negotiations can be complex, and especially when interests collide, social workers strive to make time horizons meaningful to parent's to prevent stagnation (Nielsen, Danneris, & Monrad, 2021). In the example below, the parents' immediate need for relief is subdued to the child's immediate and long-term need for care and stability. A key point is that this priority may be meaningful also to the parents but that it takes time to reach agreement.

Trudy and Terence are parents to 15 months old Zacharias who is diagnosed with Williams syndrome. They struggle with severe social problems, but have under close supervision and with great assistance from the child protection services managed to take care of Zacharias. However, they are struggling to meet his needs and need themselves relief from the care burden. They meet with their social worker, Mary and Susan, to talk about the problem and to discuss possible solutions:

> Trudy: It's all the fucking time. Sorry I swear, but we're on all the time. We need some relief and we need it now! We don't have anyone to call and say: "We just need a Saturday off". But we're also worried because it needs to be someone who can meet Zacharias' needs. He does not eat normally. It cannot be anyone.
>
> Susan: No, it cannot be anyone. That is why we need to be pro-active. We need to find a family that suits Zacharias rather than fitting him into some random family.
>
> Trudy: We would like it to be sooner rather than later, because he's almost one and a half. We're worn out.

9

> Susan: It can take a really long time to find a match. So, if you think that's the way to go, I'll start immediately. Sometimes we're lucky. Then it might take three months. Sometimes it can take a year or a year and a half. It's no good to Zacharias, if we find someone where we think: "Well let's see if it goes". It's better that we give ourselves the time to find the right family. If you can manage it of course?
>
> Trudy: Yes, we can. We just think that it would be fine, if we started to think about it soon (Field Notes, October 27, 2020)

When needs are in conflict, parents' needs yield to children's needs. This can be understood in terms of a child focused orientation, which is evident in England and the USA and gaining momentum in Denmark (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenæs, 2011). A child focused orientation assumes that problems result from a lack of care for children's needs and focuses on meeting children's developmental needs rather than the family or community. Zacharias' immediate and long-term needs comes to serve as a unifying reference point – something that everybody agree on is of primary importance and that pushes other concerns, including Trudy's and Terence's immediate need for relief, into an unknown future, since they do not know when a suitable solution will present itself. The risk of pushing the parents' needs for relief, however, is that they break down, which is not in the child's interests either.

Terence and especially Trudy may also comply because they know that if they do not, they risk that Zacharias will be placed in out of home care possible without their consent. Trudy has a long history with the social services and three of her children are placed in out-of-home care. According to Susan, this has left Trudy devastated, why she will do almost anything to avoid repeating history. Thus, the power to define meaningful and legitimate needs and time horizons is distributed unequally among social workers and vulnerable families who may have to comply to avoid sanctions (Nissen & Engen, 2021).

According to the social workers, it has taken a long time to build the trust required for discussing what is in the best interest of Zacharias and what it entails to be parents and primary care givers. This requires resources and an organisational approach that enable immersion into the lives of the families. Involvement with families is not predefined but continuously negotiated with the management. It is emphasised that they 'should not be involved more than absolute necessary', Susan tells in an interview (Interview, Susan & Mary, November 30, 2020). This can be understood as a translation of a neoliberal ideology promoting individual responsibility into a professional aspiration for individual empowerment as well as a recognition of people's capacities to take care of themselves possibly with the support of welfare services. However, 'the question about how fast we can close a case' remains one of the 'really difficult [questions] in this trade', as Mary puts it, since it is fraught with dilemmas and uncertainties. Mary elaborates:

> Perhaps there is not a whole lot of alarming signs in relation to a child's well-being and development at the moment, but what will it look like if we were not there? Of course, we do not know. But there is a risk that things could turn for the worse. (Interview, Susan & Mary, November 30, 2020)

Involvement with families depends on the social workers' professional estimations in conjunction with economic concerns. The social workers continuously discuss the families and how they are doing and if they are in need of more or less support. However,

limited resources constitute structural limitations and time spent on one family means less time spent on another. Because of this, social workers find it difficult to make plans that are sensitive to families' changing needs. Their experiences and expectations are not necessarily subdued neither to governmental orientation towards future potentialities (Andersen & Pors, 2016) nor to fictional expectations or imaginaries (Nissen, 2019). Rather, the future's opaqueness constitutes a dilemma for cost-effective calculations: If cases are closed early to reduce public expenditures or to take care of other families' needs, things may turn out for the worse and cases may have to be re-opened potentially increasing public expenditures.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I have argued that time and care are fundamental and interrelated aspects of social work. According to Andersson (2007), the intricate relationship between care and time has been largely neglected in care literature. Empirical analysis guided by a social constructivist approach to time may have significant potentials in refining and supplementing care theory with more nuanced accounts of time in relation to care. From this perspective, we can understand the construction of time as an integral part of the contextual practices involved in recognising and responding to needs. The social constructivist perspective frames time as more than a structural prerequisite for care. It creates awareness of the multitude of time conceptions in social work, the dilemmas involved in negotiating between potentially conflicting understanding of time, and the power invested in prioritising, defining and constructing time in various organisational and political contexts.

Research concerned with neoliberalist trends in social work has emphasised an increase in managerialism, standardisation, risk assessment, and technical solutions (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). This translates into a devaluation of social workers' practice knowledge and skills as well as interpersonal relationships founded on market individualism (Wallace & Pease, 2011). The effects of neoliberalism, however, are context dependent (Fallov & Blad, 2018). In the two cases scrutinized in this article, social workers knowledge and skills are not devalued per se. Rather, their skills and knowledge are employed to find the most cost-effective means. Likewise, relationships with vulnerable families are not reduced to interpersonal relationships based on market individualism. Rather, social workers are immersed in the families' complexities aiming at governing them closely. Immersion into the lives of vulnerable families are reduced insofar as it is deemed ineffective. In these cases, neoliberalist ideology has not so much reduced social services as it has reoriented the focus in social work towards cost-effectiveness and limited interpretations of productivity in economic terms. This reorientation affects the when and how social workers interpret, prioritise, and respond to needs. Impatient expectations of potential economic gains risk overruling or subduing knowledge about and therefore the possibilities for taking care of the needs of vulnerable people. Moreover, in line with a child focused orientation (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenæs, 2011), the power to prioritise and interpret needs, and therefore to construct time is unequally distributed among the involved parties and parents to vulnerable children seems to be holding the least favourable position, when needs are in conflict.

Drawing on Hall and Lamont (2013), Fallov and Blad (2018) argue that social welfare professionals are not passive puppets of marketisation forces but important actors in the development of professional resistance. With this article, I aspire to contribute to this debate by re-articulating a care vocabulary, which may serve as a counter-discourse to governmental imaginaries inspired by neoliberalist ideologies. Care is not an extra-discursive element, but already anchored in social work practice and humanistic values (Dybicz, 2012). Whereas neoliberal ideology promotes the economically independent individual and family, care ethics emphasises that human beings are dependent on each other and social institutions to satisfy basic needs. Relations of interdependence are fundamental features of human existence and, indeed, pre-requisites to independence (Kittay, 2011; Robinson, 2011). Care is not solely a private matter to be dealt with in the home. Rather, societies have an interest in and a responsibility for caring for its citizens (Tronto, 2013), which explains why social work is invested in governing vulnerable families well beyond the confines of the private home. If human interdependence and vulnerable families' needs are disregarded in favour of a narrow focus on economic productivity and cost-effectiveness, severe social consequences may result. Worst case scenario, vulnerable families that are dependent on social support for too long may be considered a waste of time, thereby, undermining the possibility of creating change beyond what is presently imaginable.

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