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Instrumental, Interpersonal or Holistic: Social Work Managers’ Conceptions of Safety in the Psychosocial Work Environment

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ABSTRACT
Social work managers are accountable for risks and safety in the psychosocial work environment. This article aims to understand how social work managers deal with safety in the psychosocial work environment in social service organizations with potentially conflicting logics of regulation and security, by answering the questions: How do social work managers conceptualize safety in the psychosocial work environment? What are the implications of different conceptions of safety in the psychosocial work environment for social work management? Through a qualitative phenomenographic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 27 managers in the Swedish social services, three conceptions were found: an instrumental, interpersonal and holistic conception. As each conception encompasses the former and thus increases the level of comprehensiveness, tensions between the logics of regulation and security increases. Managers with a comprehensive conception must therefore reflect on the way regulations for safety may conflict with social relationships. Implications for social work management are the need to discuss how safety management relates to social work professionalism, and the self-regulation due to the integration of safety thinking in social work professionalization. Future research could investigate how the conceptions relate to managerial and professional practice and how different parts of the social services conceptualize safety.

KEYWORDS
social work management; safety management; psychosocial work environment; phenomenography

Introduction
Any explanation of the nature of social work is dependent on a close reading of risk as a significant feature of modern societies (Webb, 2006). Today, social work organizations are required to deal with risks in different areas. One area that has gained a lot of attention in recent years is the psychosocial work environment, where social work managers, in particular, are accountable for dealing with issues of excessive caseloads, moral stress and clients’ threats on a daily basis.

This article investigates how social work managers in the social services deal with safety in the psychosocial work environment to handle such risks, in the presence of two different logics (Webb, 2006). In the first logic, the logic of regulation, social work managers enforce and implement external pressures of auditing and standardization, which regulate risk through tasks and procedures that are fundamental for an organization to operate, and correspond to the societal and political pressures of human service organizations (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2010). On the other hand, in the second logic, the logic of security, social work managers must provide safety for their employees by establishing values and norms of health and safety in the workplace (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Supportive management is important for social workers’ retention (Frost, Hojer, Campanini, Sicora, & Kullburg, 2018), trust between managers and employees is fundamental (Törner, Eklöf, Larsman, & Pousette, 2013) and implementation of safety measures is best carried out bottom-up through the involvement of employees (Wikman & Rickfors, 2018).
Social work managers need to acknowledge potential tensions between these logics, since they may be in conflict with each other. Regulating the psychosocial work environment according to a logic of regulation may create calculation and suspicion and hinder trust in accordance with the logic of security, which is difficult to reestablish when violated (cf. Webb, 2006). This resonates with the increase of proceduralism and bureaucratization of social work practice that may lead to a more top-down controlling approach, which, impedes bottom-up participation, constrains the relationship between social workers and clients, and almost always result in more procedures to regulate practice (Jones, 2010). Similarly, risk management procedures may leave relational aspects of social work practice under-emphasized and under-theorized (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010). Also, focusing on conforming to external rules and routines for safety may affect social work practice by hindering flexibility and innovation, increasing a fear of making errors and creating distrust between managers and employees (Jerak-Zuiderent, 2012; Lawler, 2015; Törner et al., 2013). How social work managers deal with safety in the psychosocial work environment in an organization with two different logics may thus have implications for social work practice as well as the relationship with clients. In the remainder of this introduction, literature relevant to the management of risks and safety in social work is discussed. The introduction ends with the article’s aim and research questions.

**Literature Review**

The management of safety in social work implicitly relates to risks. The traditional quantitative risk analysis assumes an objective and true level of risk that can be assessed through standardized techniques. But what is seen as dangerous and an acceptable risk in the psychosocial work environment might vary between contexts and is influenced by social processes and cultural patterns (Antonsen, 2009). For example, risks can be relevant to self-identity as a part of the social work profession (Kemshall, 2010) where one has to “take it”. Safety, on the other hand, refers to a situation where a statistical risk is deemed acceptable, a feeling of security and control, and constitutes a practice that aims at reducing the likelihood of hazardous events (Antonsen, 2009).

While risk management refers to the calculation of risks in a logic of regulation, research on safety climate stresses that it is impossible to make rules for every situation. Therefore, it is better to create a climate where people feel confident to assess situations and act accordingly in order to follow and improve both rules, and to enhance their skills to cope with problematic situations (Neal & Griffin, 2002). A “good” safety climate is thus not only about making people aware of rules and procedures, but about making them acknowledging new problems of safety and taking initiatives to handle such problems that have not yet been addressed in rules and procedures (Tholén, Pousette, & Törner, 2013). This contrast between compliance and participatory safety behavior resonates with several dichotomies in the safety literature (eg. from safety-I to safety-II, Hollnagel, 2014). Wikman and Rickfors (2018) argue that safety work may either be implemented top-down from managers to employees through rules and standards (stability) or implemented bottom-up (adaptability). Where stability is built on individual conformity to rules and routines and is undermined by improvisation, adaptability presupposes employees’ varying ways of performing tasks as the foundation of safety work. Still, it is not a question of either/or; organizations with unpredictable events and non-routine tasks need to be decentralized in order to adapt to local challenges, but still require some sort of centralization to be managed as a system (Wikman & Rickfors, 2018). The recent construct, psychosocial safety climate (PSC), is an example of proactive structures for safety in the work environment, created bottom-up with the participation of employees (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Such initiatives must be promoted through stable management support in order to be translated from an espoused to an enacted safety climate (Yulita, Dollard, & Idris, 2017). In sum, the safety literature generally argues for a bottom-up and adaptability perspective in the management of safety in the workplace. Still, a top-down and stability perspective through management support is acknowledged to ensure a systemic approach in organizations.
The two perspectives of the safety literature resonate with the character of social work management, where managers are forced to deal with both organizational and professional ideals and tasks. A results-based, task-oriented leadership needs to be balanced with a process and people-oriented leadership where professionals are supported (Schmid, 2010). There are thus two sides to social work management. On the one hand, management is broadly associated with efficiency, regulation, bureaucratic processes and administrative duties (Shanks, 2016). Consequently, while social work practitioners value professional individualized judgement for its flexibility and responsiveness to individual factors, social work managers value predictable knowledge for its consistency and accountability (cf. Hafford-Letchfield & Lawler, 2013; Kemshall, 2000; Webb, 2006). On the other hand, social work managers will not necessarily show loyalty and commitment to the organization rather than the profession. They often have a social work background, see themselves as social workers rather than managers (Evans, 2011), and are as much recruited and valued by their employees for their social work competence as for their managerial skills (Shanks, 2016). Like their employees, they have discretionary space and may be considered street-level bureaucrats with “a certain leeway in defining the organizational conditions of policy work achieved by street-level workers” (Hupe, Hill & Buffat, 2015, p. 325). This is also suggested to hold true for senior managers (Evans, 2016).

Hence, social work managers are not necessarily characterized by, and limited to, managerial levels and may take different positions (cf. Shanks, Lundström, &Wiklund, 2015). In the context of safety in the psychosocial work environment, these positions may allow them to manage safety corresponding to stability or adaptability, a compliance or participatory safety behavior, and more generally, the logics of regulation and security.

Aim and Research Questions

Although research has highlighted dualities in safety management and how social work managers may take different managerial positions, little research has combined the two research strands and addressed how social work managers approach the management of safety in the psychosocial work environment in organizations with potentially conflicting logics of regulation and security. One way to investigate this issue is to study social work managers’ conceptions of safety. Depending on these conceptions, managers may differ in approaches to the formulation and implementation of safety management, and subsequently social workers’ strategies (cf. Lambley, 2010). Exploring managers’ conceptions is essential for elucidating what support is required in implementation (cf. Mosson, Hasson, Wallin, & von Thiele Schwarz, 2017).

The aim is to understand how social work managers deal with safety in the psychosocial work environment in social service organizations with potentially conflicting logics of regulation and security. This is done by interviewing 27 social work managers on different levels in the social services in a large Swedish municipality. The research questions are:

1. How do social work managers conceptualize safety in the psychosocial work environment?
2. What are the implications of different conceptions of safety in the psychosocial work environment for social work management?

Next, the research methods are described and the results are presented: social work managers’ conceptions of safety in the psychosocial work environment. These three conceptions are then discussed in relation to the presented dualities and logics, followed by a conclusion.

Methods

In order to describe how managers conceptualize safety in the psychosocial work environment, a phenomenographic approach was used (Marton, 1981). It starts from the understanding of a problem or the situation to be dealt with in order to understand how people deal with it – in this case safety in the psychosocial work environment (Avby, Nilsen, & Abrandt Dahlgren, 2014). There are a limited number of qualitatively different ways to understand and make sense of a phenomenon. These conceptions signify the relationship
between what is conceived and how it is conceived (Sandberg, 2000). Phenomenography involves description rather than interpretation, aims to achieve conceptual rather than topical description, and investigates differences rather than similarities (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991).

**Sample**

The study was carried out within the social services departments of two city districts in a Swedish municipality. In each district, managers from two different units of the departments were interviewed: child welfare and social assistance. In one of the districts, managers working with addiction and debts were also interviewed. The units are both people-processing and people-changing (Hasenfeld, 1983), meaning they both categorize clients for other parts of the social services and work with face-to-face social work to improve clients’ situations. Particular to the Swedish context is the way in which the Social Services Act does not give much guidance in individual cases, giving managers and case-workers extensive discretion in individual assessments. Similar to an American (Kim & Kao, 2014), European (Frost, Hojer, Campanini, Sicora, & Kullburg, 2018) and Swedish (Tham & Meagher, 2009) pattern for social workers, both areas have a high caseworker turnover, indicating potential work environment problems.

The districts were chosen due to their shown interest in the standardization of social work and managers’ psychosocial work environment in an earlier research project. Department managers were contacted and an invitation to an interview was sent to 32 managers on all levels in the districts’ units, of which 27 agreed. As other phenomenographic studies have shown, 20 interviews is an adequate target in order to find varying conceptions (e.g. Sandberg, 2000). Managers differed in level and years of experience (see Table 1). In general, the higher the managerial level, the longer the experience. All interviewees had a bachelor in social work and experience of social work practice. It should be noted that deputy heads of units do not formally have staff liability but supervise professionals and are a link to professional practice. Still, several managerial duties and tasks are delegated to them, which makes them both qualified and significant to contribute to the overall aim of the study. In all, the variation in units, districts, managerial levels and experience ensured a variety of social service managers.

**Instrument**

A semi-structured interview guide was used with the themes background, management and leadership, psychosocial work environment and risks and safety. For this phenomenographic article, three questions were essential:

- “What does safety in the psychosocial working environment mean for you in your workplace?”
- “How do you manage and influence safety in the psychosocial work environment?”
- “What are the challenges to managing safety in the psychosocial work environment?”

The questions were thus open-ended in order to leave it to the interviewee to define, reason and reflect, but structured in order to capture both definitions and action in relation to safety in the psychosocial work environment. The interview guide was pilot tested and adjusted in another municipality prior to the study.

**Procedure**

Managers were interviewed individually by the author during one month in early 2018. Interviews took place

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### Table 1. Interviewees in relation to district, unit, level and experience as manager.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manager characteristic</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child welfare</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social assistance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy head of unit (dHoU)</td>
<td>13 (+1 HoDi)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of unit (HoU)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of department (HoDe)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of district (HoDi)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience as manager 0-1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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in interviewees’ workplaces and lasted 40–90 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and organized in the Nvivo 11 software. The study has been subject to ethical review and approved by a Swedish regional ethical review board (ref 2017/816). Information about the study and interview was sent in advance, and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees.

Data analysis

The seven-step process of phenomenographic analysis by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) was used (cf. Avby et al., 2014):

1. The transcripts were read in their entirety to get acquainted with them.
2. Significant statements by the interviewees relating to the research question were marked.
3. The statements were then compared in order to find similarities and differences. This resulted in four different aspects of safety in the psychosocial work environment, i.e. different individual ways to describe the phenomenon: basis for safety, the relationship between risks and safety in social work, managing safety, and when, where and how questions of safety are discussed.
4. Statements with similarities were then grouped in empirically based categories as conceptions of safety in the psychosocial work environment.
5. Similarity between statements was explored and described in tandem with the aspects from step three.
6. When sufficiently clear, the categories were labeled the instrumental, interpersonal and holistic category. They are delimited conceptions of managing safety in the psychosocial work environment and do not represent individual qualities among interviewees.
7. Categories were hierarchically ordered in an outcome space by searching for relationships between them. The hierarchy indicates that a higher category encompasses the lower categories. There is thus an increasing comprehensiveness from the instrumental to the interpersonal and finally the holistic conception, where the latter contains elements of the former two.

The seven-step process is not to be followed strictly but allows for an interplay between the steps (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991).

Results

The phenomenographic analysis resulted in three categories, i.e. qualitatively different conceptions of safety in the psychosocial work environment (see Table 2). The three categories are described in the remainder of this section, starting from the lowest category, the instrumental.

The Instrumental Conception

The first category emphasizes rules and regulations to handle risks and ensure safety. Managers’ primary concern is to make sure employees

Table 2. Social work managers’ conceptions of safety in the psychosocial work environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>A. Perception of basis for safety</th>
<th>B. Description of relationship between risks and safety in social work</th>
<th>C. Description of managing for safety in the psychosocial work environment</th>
<th>D. Description of when, where and how questions of safety are discussed in the workplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Interpersonal</td>
<td>Relations</td>
<td>Social work is morally and emotionally stressing. Society is tougher and less solidary today. Relations with employees and clients are fundamental.</td>
<td>Be observant to identify stress. Dialog with employees. Be a role model. Collegial support.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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follow routines for safety. The relationship between risks and safety in social work is the unpredictability and lack of knowledge of new clients, which demands safety measures in terms of physical surroundings and alarms. Managers’ signatures on diverse documents make them more visible, and some managers have been physically hurt some time during their careers. A characteristic experience is that threats and violence have become more common and have come closer, not least through social media:

It’s easier to send threats today through emails and to post something on Facebook. [Clients] record conversations [with caseworkers] and post them on the web and make fun of them […] Caseworkers find it uncomfortable … this just didn’t exist before. Or they post entire investigations that you’ve written. People read them online and say, “Oh, such worthless investigations, this caseworker is incompetent, she does bad assessments” and so on … it didn’t happen before. (HoDe 1)

Managing safety is about giving employees information and reminding them about wearing personal alarms from the reception in client meetings and during home visits in child welfare. It is crucial for employees to be updated on policies, plans, rules and routines concerning threats and violence. The individual responsibility is emphasized:

I can remind them constantly, but it is still the responsibility of every employee to know about those routines that apply in the workplace on safety, privacy, safety and risk assessment. Constantly checking that they’re doing the right thing is impossible. I’m thinking they’re adults working here who should be aware of these routines when it comes to these very serious things and follow them. I expect everyone to follow them. I might be stupid but I can’t expect less because then I would have to walk around and be worried all the time, you understand what I mean? (dHoU 11)

One senior manager who takes this view is aware that not all employees follow the routines that make managers responsible for incidents:

We’ve said that now people have to sign agreements so that we know they’ve read [the routines]. Should anything happen, us managers are responsible for everyone having read them and understood them. That’s something you have to continue to work with, when you deal with threats and violence. (HoDe 1)

Joint discussions on questions of safety in this category take place at workplace meetings where updated routines or plans against threats and violence are presented. If something happens, routines are revised. Managers can use introductions to show how physical surroundings and technology work in practice to minimize risks:

Today I had a new employee and we went down to the reception and into a visitor room and talked about how to act when you have a [client] visit. How should you be placed? “Your visitors should sit here and then you take that chair and then you have the door there and then you have the alarm there.” On a very practical level. […] I’m clear with the fact that I give the conditions, but if you do not “wear your protective clothing” and something happens … my responsibility ends here, I can’t control anything beyond this. (HoU 19)

In sum, safety in the instrumental category starts from the idea that there is little knowledge about new clients. They can get violent, so it is important to use routines and technology in the physical surroundings to carry out social work. Since safety is based on individual conformity to rules, managers need to remind employees and even obtain written agreements of the acknowledgement of rules and routines.

The Interpersonal Conception

In the second category, relationships between people are the basis for maintaining safety. Managers must be attentive of their employees’ stress levels and have an open dialog in case something happens. As this category encompasses the previous category, rules and routines are not absent. But they are seen as a safety net and a structure to be toned down, since it in itself can contribute to threats and violence. For example, the relationship between risks and safety in social work is described as people becoming pressured and unpredictable due to social workers’ interventions in their lives. One manager relates clients’ unpredictability to a lack of communication between caseworkers and clients and between caseworkers and other public actors that could lead to denied applications:

We’ve worked a lot with communicating to the client that if you don’t go to the [municipal job center] and
you get a rejection, you need to call the client and ask how it happened. “We have talked about this, if you don’t participate, you don’t have the right to social assistance.” To communicate more. It’s safety thinking, the importance of the client’s understanding so that a rejection does not come as a surprise. If you become fuzzy and afraid of being clear, then you will create unnecessary situations. (HoU 15)

Safety in the psychosocial work environment is thus not as much a question of prediction and regulation of external threats, but of good relations with clients. One manager in social assistance relates safety to a climate of trust where employees are not afraid to speak out but feel safe with each other and with their managers. Burnout is not only a result of high caseloads, but of relationships:

If you have very good relationships in a workplace then the risk of burnout is reduced. Because there is somebody who catches you when you fall. The feeling of safety and comfort at work. And especially when working with vulnerable people as we do. It gets under your skin, people feeling bad, other actors who want us to do more and clients’ parents who call because their children haven’t received money. That’s why you need to have a feeling of safety. I also think that in situations of threats and violence … the worst part is if you don’t dare to talk about what you have experienced because it is expected of you to handle certain things. That you should be tough and so on. It is important to me that you do not end up in such a climate. (dHoU 13)

Managers should be attentive of the work environment and excessive demands among employees. The characteristic way to discuss questions of safety is in the dialog between manager and employee, mostly informally but also in staff appraisals. Some managers describe how they can sense that something is wrong and that it is important to be able to adjust the workload if caseworkers show signs of emotional stress:

I try to keep track, and I tend to be pretty good at noticing…. I can notice when someone seems to be down, and I try to say, “How’s it going?” – “No, it’s nothing.” – “Okay” – “I just want to ask, because I get a feeling that maybe there’s something, but if you say that it’s nothing, it’s completely okay.” I have no problem backing off if someone says so. But it’s important to try to read your employees. (HoU 16)

In sum, in the interpersonal category, social work intervenes in people’s lives, and they can become pressured and unpredictable. Safety needs to be based on relations and dialog whether it concerns clients, employees or managers. Rules and regulations are not trivial but are a safety net rather than something that handles daily risks.

The Holistic Conception
In the third category, safety in the psychosocial work environment starts from the idea that some people are unpredictable, so social work organizations must be prepared and have support structures in place. Unpredictability is thus not something that can be regulated in detail as in the instrumental category, but has to be accepted and handled through support structures, joint responsibility and social work professionalization. The relational aspect of social work is complemented by unpredictability:

There are things that I can’t influence … which are risks. And it’s because we are working with people. And they may be erratic and unpredictable in their behavior. And I think that we work with the most delicate issues that people absolutely don’t want to share with anyone else. And it’s our task to talk about those things. Or to be curious about them and how the client ended up in this situation. And that’s where I think of safety. When people are cornered, it results in aggression or threats or such things. It’s an interaction. Some get scared, others don’t. (dHoU 3)

There is also an ambivalence to the conflict between relations and regulations, since the unpredictability still must be handled in some rule-based way:

I think that social work, where you think good about people and want to see what’s positive in everyone, can tone down threats. You might think “That wasn’t that dangerous?”, or that you are uncomfortable asking someone entering behind you at the staff entrance: “Can I see your card because I don’t recognize you?” or: “It’s just us two at this meeting, I don’t need any alarm”. And there I must, while endeavoring to see people’s possibilities and have a positive attitude towards service users, not only be a realist but also a pessimist with regard to safety. If something happens then we should have done everything we could to prevent it. […] But it’s partly in conflict with the social change work…. not in conflict with the exercise of authority…. but with being caring and having a relationship. (HoU 18)
Similarly, there are statements where managers reflect on the counterproductive effects of rules and regulations, such as whether caseworkers should show their personal alarm that they wear in client meetings or not, since showing them might provoke the client. A characteristic of this category is thus the presence of both regulations and relations that makes managers ambivalent to how safety should be approached. However, the holistic category is more than the sum of the previous two categories. The basis for safety is different support structures which permit managers to handle the unexpected. One is to create a sense of shared responsibility. Besides following rules and routines, they should actively participate in the improvement of safety. One manager speaks about anchoring issues among employees, “to discuss how things should be done and how work should be organized” (HoU 9). A frequently described way to do this is to address safety during “case meetings” where caseworkers discuss current cases, thus providing a stress-reducing structure to caseworkers. Another manager describes the importance of weekly group meetings where every caseworker has a chance to tell the group about case difficulties and other work-related problems. Even if caseworkers do not speak out about work environment problems, “I get a sense of how they cope” (dHoU 4). Safety must be kept alive not only through ad hoc dialog or updated regulative measures; as in the previous two categories, they presuppose and enhance each other:

I think the question of safety is alive, but people must be reminded of it constantly. Just as with all obvious routines, one must keep talking about them. We often react in completely different ways than we thought we would, especially in the case of threats and violence. Something that has happened to you that didn’t affect you much in the moment may return much later, and then it’s important for me that I, as a manager, step in at the beginning and exaggerate the support, rather than let it drop. (HoU 16)

Support structures for social workers can also be seen as competency built through ongoing vocational training and introductions. This is especially important since half of one unit’s caseworkers got their social work degree in the last year. Integrating issues of safety in introductions thus relates safety issues to social work professionalism.

In sum, the holistic conception starts from the idea that people are unpredictable, so employees must be anticipative through participation and support structures.

Discussion

The results have shown how social work managers conceptualize safety in the psychosocial work environment in three different ways. In this closing section, the three conceptions are discussed through the logics of regulation and security, as well as what their implications are for social work management.

Conceptions between the Logics of Regulation and Security

Where the instrumental category has ties to the logic of regulation, the interpersonal category lies closer to the logic of security. And at the top of the hierarchy, the holistic category may be understood as the interaction of the two logics. It is also here that tensions between logics are most visible.

In the instrumental category, the way to handle the unpredictability of social work is to calculate and plan the work environment in a way that minimizes risks, most often conceptualized as external threats and violence. Managers implement safety measures top-down and it is important to remind, and demand written approval from, individual employees to conform to the prescribed procedures. This resonates with features of the logic of regulation such as the proceduralism and standardization of social work where the aim is to promote uniformity and predictability of tasks and procedures (cf. Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). The category represents the risk assessment side of safety management where there is an assumption of risks “out there” that can be estimated using standardized techniques (cf. Antonsen, 2009). A notable unintended consequence is that the discovery of risks, as the potential provocation of clients through visible alarms, may
highlights new aspects of the workplace that can be modified and regulated.

In contrast to the instrumental conception, the interpersonal conception is based on the reflection that the social services in themselves play a role in potential threats and violence from clients. Safety in the psychosocial work environment must therefore begin in the relationship and trust between manager and employee, and employee and client. Managing safety in this category is not primarily about calculating risks, but creating trust and safety in relationships with other people. This resonates with the logic of security where managers provide security for their employees through trust in social relations. However, risk prevention is related to interpersonal dialog and the managerial observation of employees, making the conception ad hoc rather than anticipating, ex post rather than ex ante. In a safety management perspective, there is thus a lack of prevention through formal structure, participation and bottom-up strategy in this category, making it vulnerable to the contingencies of social work. It is noticeable that even though the interpersonal conception encompasses the instrumental conception, there is little built-in conflict between the two in the interpersonal conception. While rules and routines are a safety net and taken for granted structure, they are not the decisive way for handling safety and should instead be toned down.

Conflict between logics is instead most noticeable in the holistic conception. As the highest category encompassing the former two categories, the holistic conception of safety relates to both logics. On the one hand, there is a focus on creating and regulating structures of different kinds to handle the unpredictability of social work. On the other hand, these structures operate through relations and trust. Although it may seem like the “best of both worlds”, there is an ambivalence and discussion in this category relating to the fact that regulations and relations can be in conflict with each other. As Webb (2006) argues, regulation creates calculation and suspicion and hinders trust, which is difficult to reestablish when violated. The ambivalence in the holistic category points to a reflective yet fragmented stance that leaves a manager undecided on whether what you are doing as a manager is the right way to go in a social work context where the relationship with the client is often seen as fundamental to success. However, Webb also argues that the logics can reinforce each other, as when mechanisms of trust, such as discussions of safety among colleagues, are integrated in formal structures or social work professionalization such as introductions. If done in a participatory manner, this resonates with research on safety management and climate (e.g. Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Törner et al., 2013).

In sum, social work managers’ conceptions of safety in the psychosocial work environment can be understood in the increasing comprehensiveness from a logic of regulation, to a logic of security, and finally in the interaction and potential conflict between them. The tension between logics is thus increasing with the comprehensiveness of social work managers’ conceptions. This has implications for social work management.

**Social Work Managers and Safety Management**

The conclusion that the tension between logics increases with managers’ comprehensiveness, implies that managers with a more holistic and reflective stance towards safety in the psychosocial work environment may be more aware of the potential contradictions involved in the implementation of safety management. As seen in the holistic conception, the question is not whether to regulate or not, but rather how different aspects of safety management can harmonize with actual social work practices. Safety management in social work thus requires a continuous discussion on social work professionalism. In light of the recent debate on standardization where social work is said to have become practiced in line with the goals and values of the organization rather than the professional (Evetts, 2010; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016), it could therefore be argued that questions of safety could also risk being dealt with in an organizational top-down perspective. From a safety research perspective, such a development would be unproductive. Since not all aspects of all possible situations can be regulated, and would be too complex to grasp, there is a need to give
professionals decision-making skills within their discretionary space in order to take on the unpredictability of everyday social work. This resonates with an adaptive perspective of safety management implementation where safety measures are developed and adapted to the actual practice performed by employees (Wikman & Rickfors, 2018).

Furthermore, a feature of the holistic conception is the way safety management is integrated with social work professionalization such as introductions. This raises the question whether risks and safety are a valid part of social work managers’ and professionals’ curricula. On the one hand, topics relevant to the everyday practice of employees in human service organizations are relevant for social work education to problematize and put in perspective. For example, in the leadership literature, it is acknowledged that developmental practices should be adapted to the needs and roles of managers (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). On the other hand, integrating questions of safety in social work management and professionalization implies the institutionalization of thinking in terms of risks and safety in social work practice. This may be a form of self-regulation of social work, an integral feature of the logic of regulation and the audit society, where actors eventually do not need externally imposed rules to conform to certain behaviors, but instead regulate themselves (cf. Power, 1997; Webb, 2006). In management practice, it takes the most comprehensive conception of safety to reflect on this dilemma. In this sense, critical ongoing reflection regarding the relationship between regulations and relations may be of benefit to social workers and managers when engaging with safety issues in the psychosocial work environment.

**Limitations and Strengths**

Another result is that safety in the psychosocial work environment is most often associated with avoidance of clients’ threats and violence. Indeed, the social services has traditionally been exposed to threats and violence in the workplace due to the face-to-face work with vulnerable clients in exposed situations (e.g. Padyab & Ghazinour, 2015; Robson, Cossar, & Quayle, 2014). However, this may also be a limitation in the research design. Clients’ threats and violence were often the first things interviewees associated with safety, possibly leaving other problems in a broader psychosocial work environment unmentioned. Another limitation is that the results do not depict an actual social work management practice. Although the phenomenographic approach starts from conceptions in order to understand how people deal with the problem being conceptualized, the research design sheds little light on how social work managers manage safety in practice. Nonetheless, since understanding is a fundamental factor for successful implementation (Lundquist, 1987), the description of conceptions and how they relate to each other is an important part of analyzing conditions of implementation.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, social work managers conceptualize safety in the psychosocial work environment as instrumental, interpersonal or holistic. As the conceptions increase in comprehensiveness, they also increase in terms of contradictions and potential conflicts between the logics of regulation and security. A holistic conception challenges manager to reflect on and critically assess the way in which regulations for safety may conflict with relations in a social work organization. This has two implications for social work management. First, safety management must be discussed in dialog with social work professionalism in order to harmonize with actual social work practices. Second, as safety management may become integrated with social work professionalization such as introductions and create self-regulative elements, it may take the most comprehensive conception of safety to critically reflect on the relationship between regulations and relations when engaging with safety issues in the psychosocial work environment.

These key findings resonate with research on safety and social work management. The duality and ambiguity of social work management (Schmid, 2010; Shanks, 2016; Shanks et al., 2015) may contribute to different conceptions that range from the top-down regulatory management...
of risks to the more recent approach seen in research on safety climate (Törner et al., 2013; Wikman & Rickfors, 2018). Furthermore, the findings elucidate in-built tensions between perspectives on safety essential to the understanding of managerial conditions for implementation (cf. Mosson et al., 2017).

Future research could investigate how the conceptions relate to safety management in practice. As research has shown, an espoused psychosocial safety climate on a managerial level does not equal an enacted climate in a certain operational domain (Yulita et al., 2017). For example, will the tensions between the logics of regulation and security that stands out in the holistic conception be in conflict or reinforce each other, and how can managers handle or achieve such situations? And in what ways are managers relating safety management to a professional social work practice? Also, different areas of the human services may have their own safety issues to deal with. Future research could compare managers’ conceptions of safety in different areas of the human services. Elderly care has a longer history of working with standardization and patient safety and could provide insights into how the logics of regulation and security have been handled by managers (cf. Törner et al., 2013).

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