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**To be new in Child Welfare Agency – A study of Social Worker's  
perspectives on challenges, coping strategies and support systems**

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# Abstract

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Social work education in Sweden has been characterized to provide general information about social work practice. With a new degree, social workers are able to find suitable jobs offer in many areas related to welfare services. With the increasing of work demands of Child Welfare agencies, newly qualified social workers are hired to provide services to families and children. Over the last years, Child Welfare agencies had been criticised by the media by providing poor organizational climate in their institutions. The social workers are victims of organizational changes, characterized by bureaucracy process where they are doing different administrative work while at the same time working with clients. This has provided negative effects in the organizations: stress related disorders, unhappy clients and an increase of turnovers. Therefore, the agencies developed different support systems to endorse job satisfaction. The aim of this explorative qualitative study focuses on the main challenges newly qualified social workers and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies face; the coping strategies they develop in order to have an healthy life; and how they received support from Child Welfare in both informal and formal context. Five semi-structured interviews and a group interview were used to gather the data. A total of eight participants provided their experiences in their agencies. The results show that the workers challenges initiate from the transition of the university. With lack of practice, social workers use their discretion to address families and children. Furthermore, they are victims of administrative works, which develops many problems for them and their clients. However, with the help of resources (personal characteristics and social support) they develop coping strategies to face new challenges. The Child Welfare agencies develop an organizational climate characterized by a supportive environment. These systems are implemented in both informal and formal context where supervisor, external supervisor and colleagues develop strategies to help the social workers to address their challenges and endorse professional resilience. Nevertheless, each agency differs from another, which creates imbalance in their support systems by providing different types of services limited by the agency regulations.

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**Author:** Isabel Amelia Alvarez Moncada

**Key words:** Child Welfare Agency, support, Human Services Organization, coping, supervision

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Isabel Alvarez

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This introductory chapter will discuss the present background and conditions about social work practice in Child Welfare Agencies. With literature review integrated, this chapter will provide information about social work studies; the child welfare context and process in Sweden; the challenges inside Child Welfare Agencies; followed by the purpose of the research and the research questions. All this information will facilitate the reader's understanding about the main purpose of this thesis.

## **1.1 Background**

### **1.1.1 Social work studies in Sweden**

Over the last decades, social work practices in Sweden have gone through several transformations. Formerly, social services were characterized to be generalist and integrated. Nevertheless, over the years, the organization of personal social services (PSS) has developed into a specialized system characterized by dividing functions into categories (Perlinski, Blom, and Moren, 2013). Nowadays, most of the social work practice in Sweden is portrayed by specialization in different areas (ibid.).

According to Sandstrom (2007), Sweden participates in international programs for growth and cooperation interactions as a member of the European Union. By explaining that perhaps most of their social work educators are affiliated with International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), Sweden develops international practices of social work (ibid.). Furthermore, Sweden is familiarized with the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (ibid.). Its objective is to process a global mind-set of social work education. According to its statements, the document details standard procedures of social work education in nine aspects: “the school's core purpose or mission statement; programme objectives and outcomes; programme curricula including fieldwork; core curricula; professional staff; student social workers; structure, administration, governance and resources; cultural diversity; and social work values and ethics” (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004, p. 493). However, in Sweden, in context of social work education, it has not been discussed (Sandstrom, 2007). In 1999, twenty-nine European governments signed an agreement, known as the Bologna Process, with the objective of creating a ‘European area of Higher Education’ by 2010 (Frost, Höjer, and Campanini, 2013). This is characterized by promoting “employability” in universities and colleges (Sandstrom, 2007). Sweden was one of the countries that signed the treaty and many universities have to adapt their programs in terms of “workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profiles” (Frost et al., 2013, p. 329).

In Sweden, social work degree requires 3.5 years of study (Frost et al., 2013). Students must obtain knowledge and understanding through their skills and competences and follow the code of ethics and values to be good professionals. Additionally, a thesis worth of 15 credits must be written by the undergraduates (Sandstrom, 2007). In term of learning from social work practice in the field, universities must find placements for the students to be able to practice their skills. However, unfortunately, there are a lot of limitations for the students to be able to participate in the field (Frost et al., 2013). Furthermore, new professionals feel that their social work degree only provides

generalist education and they lack of training (Khoo, Hyvönen, and Nygren, 2002). Yet, graduates are able to enter the labour market with their social work degree (Campanini, Frost, and Höjer, 2012; Khoo et al., 2002; Wiklund, 2006). The graduates can find jobs in different areas such as: day and residential care facilities, psychiatry, health care, and schools are other placements (Sandstrom, 2007). Therefore, they are able to find work in the area of child welfare, since the majority of social workers in Sweden are employed in the public sector (Kullberg, 2013).

### **1.1.2 The Swedish Context**

Throughout the years, Sweden has been viewed internationally as a successful role model of a human well-being society. Using Esping-Andersen (1990) welfare typology, Sweden has a social democratic welfare system, where universal systems are predominant to promote equality among its citizens (Bradley, Engelbrecht, and Höjer, 2010; Coccozza and Hort, 2011; Esping-Andersen, 1990). It has a model that upholds fair social policies by creating programs that benefits the least disadvantages to promote self-determination (Kymlicka, 2001). Furthermore, based on progressive taxation and high public expenditure, the welfare state has a high degree of state intervention (Höjer, 2008). Is the state responsibility to establish these laws, however, the 289 municipalities have the obligation to organize and administrate them (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007; Wiklund, 2006). Therefore, welfare services belong to the local government and can be organized in different ways (Coccozza and Hort, 2011).

### **1.1.3 Child welfare in Sweden**

Child welfare is characterized as a family oriented model where child maltreatment is perceived as an aspect of the family conflicts; hence, the municipalities must ensure that the children grow in a safe environment with protection and support and work together in cooperation with their families (Freymond and Cameron, 2006). Furthermore, the municipality is involved in the process. Each municipality has a Social Welfare Board (SWB) nominated by political parties. In big cities, there are several SWB and each of them has a Social Welfare Committee (SWC) formed by regular citizens as a subdivision (Höjer and Svensson, 2014). Municipalities have wide discretion in how they organize and administrate child welfare work (Wiklund, 2006); nonetheless, they all are responsible to follow the legislation of child welfare services.

In terms of policy framework, the child welfare services are regulated by two acts: the Social Services Act (SSA or SOL in Swedish), based on voluntary cooperation with the family and the Care of Young People Act (CYPA or LVU in Swedish), the latter characterized regulating when and how coercive action can be taken (Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999; Höjer, 2008). The Social Services Act regulates many areas such as economic assistance, pre-school childcare, elderly care, substance abuse, etc. It is its objective to promote social support and interventions to the families in need (Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999).

According to the regulation, every citizen or professional has the responsibility to communicate any type of child maltreatment they perceived (Coccozza and Hort, 2011). Within each report, an initial assessment is followed by the social services. It is the social worker's obligation to investigate if the file presents evidence to continue (ibid.). If the case doesn't show signs of child maltreatment, then it is closed. But, if it determinates child maltreatment, then an investigation is conducted to help the family

by providing them support (ibid.). Finally, the authorities decide what type of support the child needs. Among this part, the family plays an important role: services can be provided on voluntary access, where the family agrees with authorities; or it can be coercive where the court has to decide (ibid.). Nevertheless, in general terms, each municipality follow the BBIC<sup>1</sup> guidelines to support the child and the family (Cocozza and Hort, 2011; Freymond and Cameron, 2006; Rasmusson et al., 2010). These guidelines were imported from England (Cocozza and Hort, 2011) and they are a tool for the social worker for the investigations, planning and intervention based on the conceptual: “child, development, parenting capacity and environment” (Rasmusson, et al., 2010, p. 456).

#### **1.1.4 Child Welfare Agency in Sweden**

Child welfare is conducted in a formal organizational structure that is specialized (Wiklund, 2006). The social workers work into different units (family and children / adolescents) and they are responsible for a specific task (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007). Families with young children are handled by social workers units; while adolescents with different types of problems are the responsibility from another unit (ibid.).

Furthermore, child welfare agencies are responsible to provide support to its professionals. In Sweden, social workers are able to receive support from their managers (Bradley et al., 2010); they are responsible to provide administrative, educational and support to its social workers (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Also, workers are able to receive external supervision from someone outside the agency (Bradley et al., 2010). Many studies have confirmed the importance of external supervision in social work practice. It is characterized as educational and supportive (Bradley et al., 2010) and it helps the social worker to develop professional and personal skills (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Furthermore, child welfare is considered one of the most demanding works for social workers; therefore supervision encourage the workers to face new challenges (Tham and Meagher, 2009).

#### **1.1.5 Challenges**

In recent years, there had been an increasing amount of turnover in child welfare agencies in Sweden (Tham, 2007). From personal feelings such as stress related disorders and threats and violence; to lack of professional knowledge and experience and organization deficiency of poor supervision, obstacle in the organization, poor relationship with supervisors, low income, lacking of systematic evaluation and training (Cocozza and Hort, 2011; Khoo et al., 2002; Perlinski, 2010; Tham, 2007; Tham and Meagher, 2009) are the main causes of the high levels of turnover. These problems can be summarized into three categories: diversity characteristics (gender, age), organizational climate and individual outcomes (Mor Barak et al., 2006) which explained the causes of turnover.

In Sweden, there has been several studies about how social work practice in child welfare develops (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007; Bradley et al., 2010; Bradley and Höjer, 2009; Campanini et al., 2012; Cocozza, Gustafsson, and Sydsjö, 2006; Cocozza

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<sup>1</sup> BBIC stands for Barnets Bästa I Centrum. A Swedish model build on the English model ICS (Integrated Child Systems).



and Hort, 2011). Nevertheless, the majority are conducted in small municipalities; because big municipalities, such as Gothenburg, are divided into different districts and socioeconomic and demographic variables are not obtainable (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007). Therefore, in English literature about the Swedish context, there is a lack of information about how the social work practices is conducted in child welfare; and how it influence the practitioner in a personal and in professional matter. Nevertheless, child welfare is the largest field of social work practice within the municipalities (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007). As a consequence, it increments the demand of social workers in their field. All over the world, agencies waste a lot of money into hiring and training their specialists (Healy, Meagher, and Cullin, 2009). Furthermore, they experience some problems in recruiting new staffs. The agency are looking for well trained professionals to deliver effective services (Tham and Meagher, 2009), hence, agency demands specializations (Perlinski et al., 2013). However, with the high levels of turnover, the degree of social work professionalism has been under examination (Cocozza and Hort, 2011).

In Sweden, the implementation of New Public Management had affected the level of professionalization of Social Work practice in many areas (Berg, Barry, and Chandler, 2008). Characterized as a new form of intervention, where market economics describe that competition, freedom of choices and evaluation will provide effective involvement (Bradley et al., 2010). Previous studies concluded that the New Public Management creates hierarchies and fragmentation of management between professionals (Berg et al., 2008; Healy and Meagher, 2004). Therefore, the deprofessionalization of social work has created many concerns about the services quality (Healy and Meagher, 2004).

According to Healy and Meagher (2004), social work practice within child welfare is challenging. Within these services among other things, decisions have to be taken if parents shall have the right to take care of their own children. Being young, naive and employed within short time of period, the social workers handle situations using their own professional judgement (Tham and Meagher, 2009). At the same time, the current universities' curriculum creates a gap between themselves and their organization because it challenges their job's requirements and description by not adapting new types of knowledge in their institutions (Al-Ma'seb, Alkhurinej, and Alduwaihi, 2013). According to literature, the only requirement to enter Child Welfare is the bachelor degree in social work (Campanini et al., 2012; Khoo et al., 2002; Wiklund, 2006). Cocozza and Hort (2011) concluded that over the last 15 years, social work's professionalism has been criticized since it lacks training and qualified professionals do not have tools to address difficult work such as child protection, which develops limitations at the time of practice. Therefore, it is possible to hire qualified social workers with previous experiences in other areas of social work practice. Nevertheless, their level of professionalism are under review (Cocozza and Hort, 2011). On the other hand, there has been limited information in working methods in social work practice. However, according to one study, in three Swedish' municipalities<sup>2</sup>, social workers use unspecific methods to address their situation with solution focused is the most common strategy. Furthermore, gaining experience from practice help them to get knowledge about the field (Perlinski et al., 2013); compared to the generalist education provided by their bachelor (Cocozza and Hort, 2011). Moreover, they must handle voluntary and

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<sup>2</sup>In their article titled: *Getting a sense of the client: Working methods in the personal social services in Sweden*; the authors didn't provide specific names of the municipalities of the study to maintain anonymity.

coercive situations at the same time, which creates higher demands for the job (Tham and Meagher, 2009). Conclusively, gaining the client trust is one of the most important things for the workers (Perlinski et al., 2013); therefore, these restrictions affect the social worker's health and creates a problem while working with clients. Yet, within these negative factors, some workers are able to overcome them and become resilient.

Within welfare services, support is an important key to develop resilience (Collins, 2008). As mentioned before, the organization has an influence on turnover; nevertheless, some authors agree that it has a great impact on professional resilience. Being rewarded by managers and peers is of major importance for the social workers to feel that they are doing a great job (Tham, 2007). Furthermore, internal and external supervision influence the social work practice and motivate the worker to grow in a personal and in professional way (Bradley et al., 2010; Frost, Höjer, and Campanini, 2015). Supportive leadership encourage the worker to face the difficulties and demands of their job (Tham and Meagher, 2009). At the same time, challenging situations strengthen the relationship between managers and co-workers, which leads them to formulate solutions to their problems (ibid.). Personal traits can be considered as resilient factors: personal qualities, talents, spirituality, be able to interact with others (Frost et al., 2015; Saleebey, 1996). Many professionals agree that their social work education lack of practice; yet, they feel that it has provide tools (theoretical backgrounds) to help them to do a better job (Campanini et al., 2012; Frost et al., 2015). Finally, to just help the clients to have a better life is a characteristic of coping strategies to promote resilience inside social work practice (Collins, 2008).

## 1.2 Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to determinate what are the main challenges newly qualified social workers and qualified social workers who are new in Child Welfare Agencies are facing. Additionally, the study aim to understand the coping strategies developed by these professionals and the type of support they receive from Child Welfare Agencies. In this sense, this study contributes to a better understanding of the perception of these professionals about the work environment, how do they cope with challenges and how supporting system play a key role in maintaining job satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

## 1.3 Research questions

- What are the main challenges the NQSW's<sup>3</sup> and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies faces?
- What are the copings strategies used NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies?
- What kind of support NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies receive from the organization?

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<sup>3</sup> Abbreviation of Newly Qualified Social Workers

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

Different theories and concepts of organizational development have been studied by many different researches. Many authors had established different strategies to understand how Child Welfare Agencies are developed and provide support to the staff (Cahalane and Sites, 2008; Hasenfeld, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). Furthermore, the concept of coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), strengths (Saleebey, 2006) and resilience (Gilligan, 2004) had been used in many research. Therefore, general literature provides an extensive perspective about a specific context. To limit the theoretical framework for the purpose of this research, a construction of empirical material of various concepts and theories will be used to explain the emerging themes of the research. The characteristics of human services organizations in general will briefly discuss; followed up by describing Child Welfare Agencies as an example of these organizations, reinforced by the importance of support system. Finally, there will be a description about coping strategies.

### **2.1 Human Services Organization**

#### **2.1.1 Context**

Hasenfeld (2010) describes that human services organizations have an important role in people's lives. Known as schools, social services agencies, hospitals, they differ from other institutions because they are viewed as a symbol of the caring society where they have the responsibility to maintain the citizens well being.

##### **2.1.1.1 Professionals**

###### **2.1.1.1.1 Street-level Bureaucrats**

Lipsky (2010) introduces the term of street level bureaucrats<sup>4</sup> as a concept of defining public services workers (social workers, teachers, police officers, law enforcement, judges, public lawyers, health workers and other public employees) as professionals who work directly with citizens and use their own discretion in the execution of their work.

Lipsky (2010) expresses that street levels bureaucrats have discretion in determine what type of benefits or sanction their clients should receive; therefore, they are conceived as policy makers. Nevertheless, they have to follow their organizations guidelines or rules to execute their job and this can create some complications (ibid.). There are three major situations on which worker are facing: first, in very difficult situations they can't always follow the rules; second, they require to work with human being, hence, sometimes they must allow flexibility; finally, their discretion encourage clients to believe that the workers are responsible for their well being. Consequently, they have autonomy within their work (ibid.). To respond to this situation, the organizations have

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<sup>4</sup> Street level bureaucrat is a concept introduced by Lipksy (2010), which develops the function of professionals that work directly with citizens. It has similarities with the concept of human services organizations, introduced by Hasenfeld (2010); therefore, in this thesis street level bureaucrats will be used as a significant instrument of human services organization.

to use strategies to improve their worker's job satisfaction by providing material and psychological gratification (ibid.).

Human services organizations are also known as street-level bureaucracy. It is within their objective to reduce street level bureaucrats autonomy and adapt into the institutions they work (Lipsky, 2010). By using different type of manuals and policies, these institutions provide instructions in how the work should be conducted. Moreover, to maintain high standards within their services, the organizations must perform achievable goals by implementing their policies and use performance measure (e.g. supervision) to help their workers to increase their job satisfaction (ibid.).

#### **2.1.1.1.2 Managers**

Lipsky (2010) states that managers are responsible to achieve the agency objective. Contrary to street-levels bureaucrats that work directly with clients, managers are concerned about the staff performance, cost and restriction of their discretion, with the objective to adapt them to the organizations' rules. However, the organizations need their mutual dependence relationship to maintain their standards. This reciprocity is conducted by trust and mutual support (ibid.).

#### **2.1.1.2 Organizational Climate**

Organizational climate<sup>5</sup> is defined as a process where employees experience a climate of shared perceptions of the policies, practices and procedure, getting rewarded, supported and expected (Schneider, Ehrhart, and Macey, 2013). Put differently, it is defined in how the employees perceive their own work environment (Cahalane and Sites, 2008).

Climate is described as the environment where employees work. It consist on the employee relationship, quality of supervision, support from administration, and resources (Cahalane and Sites, 2008). Also, the organizational structure and functioning affect the employee practice (Landsman, 2002).

#### **2.1.1.2.1 Moral Work**

An effective human services organization is characterized by producing moral work. Using the concept of people as "raw material" (Hasenfeld, 2010, p. 11), human beings need to be examined, categorized and fixed. Put different, the human services organizations work with people in order to remodel their personal attributes. Nevertheless, they differ from other institutions because every action used on behalf of the clients represent a moral judgement (Hasenfeld, 2010). Therefore, it is the worker's responsibility to help the powerless client to achieve self-determination.

Hasenfeld (2010) describes that the relation between clients and workers is the "primary vehicle"<sup>6</sup> (p. 21) to carry out the work. Furthermore, a path is created between them by

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<sup>5</sup> Organizational climate is a concept introduced by Schneider, Ehrhart, and Macey (2013), it defines the climate inside an organization based on policies, practices an procedure. In this sense, this concept is an essential characteristic of human services organization. Therefore, in this thesis the concept will be use to determinate the type of climate Child Welfare Agencies provide to the social workers.

<sup>6</sup> Hasenfeld in chapter two explains the importance of the relationship between client and professional and use this concept as a metaphor.

the assessment and services provide. Consequently, by exchanging information, both professionals and clients established a relationship based on trust. As an important resource of the organization, workers engage their discretion by their actions. In that sense, the organization depends on them to apply the institution's rule to promote moral solutions. Furthermore, by sharing their personal's beliefs and experiences with their peers, they can communicate their problems and fears and their personal moral beliefs become institutionalized within the organization. At the organization level, policies are used as a control mechanism in order to promote moral work within the institution with the purpose of providing services based on trustworthiness and fairness (ibid.).

#### **2.1.1.2.1.1 Institutional environment developing moral work**

Different professions confirm the institutional environment (Hasenfeld, 2010). By sharing similar ideologies, professionals build rules based on moral work to maintain legitimacy of what they do (ibid.). Furthermore, as time passes, new forms of society are formed; in consequence, these institutions adapt into these changes to enhance new policies to promote moral entrepreneurship (ibid.).

Technology is used to promote moral work within the human services organizations. Hasenfeld (2010) describes that the institutional policies use technology as a sanctioned practice. Furthermore, it is applied in three different levels of the company: within the intuitional level, technology is used to apply rules; within the organization, it can be used as monitoring and to verify the quality of the staff; at the worker level, they adapt technology to their own work context; finally, at the client level, technology is implemented as a form of intervention. Moreover, by introducing the concept of "*diagnosis*", (2010, p. 19) he explains that workers use technology to categorize the clients' situations, therefore, it is a mechanism of control. By using manuals, tests and books, professionals can identify the clients' circumstances and proceed to use a type of intervention. Nevertheless, this might create some disrupt between the client-worker relationship.

While working with clients, professionals applied technology in both voluntary and coercive situations. In his book, Hasenfeld (2010) discussed that technology is a tool to control the clients. In the case of Child Welfare in Sweden, the legislations are the main technologies systems to approach the clients. By implementing the Social Services acts, the relationship between workers and clients is based on voluntary action. Nevertheless, the Care of Young People Acts is used in coercive situations; therefore, it is an instrument of control. However, working in partnership with the clients is the main emphasis of support inside these agencies (Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999). Consequently, it promotes trust between both parties (Berg and Kelly, 2000; Hasenfeld, 2010; Saleebey, 2006).

#### **2.1.1.2.2 Emotional Work**

Hasenfeld (2010) describes how workers use their emotions inside the human services organizations. Sometimes, while working with clients, professionals develop emotions that are not authentic, but necessary to the organizations needs. As consequences, they are victims of emotional exhaustion. This practice is very common in welfare organizations. Within it, workers have to use different types of emotions to provide services and this creates negative consequences for the professional (ibid.). Therefore, organizations must ensure emotional work through supervision, training and

socialization (ibid.). Starting with supervision, it helps professionals in how to handle their emotions with their clients (ibid.). Furthermore, it teaches workers how develop skills of awareness and self-control (ibid.). The organization has also an important role, by creating an environment where “organized emotional care” is reflected, workers will be able to establish a strong relationship with each other. Therefore, a caring relationship is formed (ibid.).

### 2.1.2 Child Welfare Organizations

As an example of human services organization, Child Welfare Agencies are formed with many resources. According to Berg and Kelly (2000) social workers are important keys for the agencies. They are the one who work directly with the clients; therefore, it is their job to be kind, curious, interested, have humour to develop solutions to their clients problems (ibid.). At the same time, managers/supervisors have an important role to endorse the social workers practice. Using tools such as evaluations, saying “thank you”, meeting the workers and asking about their interventions and feedbacks; they help the social worker to feel important within the organization (ibid.). Therefore, by caring and nurturing, the workers feel valued and appreciated (ibid.).

Child Welfare social workers are considered as “the ultimate street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 233) because they face many challenges. Lipsky (2010) described that these professionals work with a double-edged knife: they have to use their talents to support families but at the same time they have to use coercive action and remove the child from a hostile environment. Therefore, they are vulnerable about their significant discretion. In this sense, supervision is an important strategy to help the social workers. By using different strategies such as training, support and working in teams, Child Welfare agencies maintain high standards within their jobs (ibid.).

## 2.2 Support Systems

Lipsky (2010) explained that support is the main key to increase the work performance. By receiving rewards, evaluations and a supportive environment from their managers, workers are able to feel that they are valuable members of the organization; therefore, they are able to cope with difficult clients and promote a better job performance. Furthermore, it protects the worker from difficult clients. Specialists are responsible to help workers who feel negative feelings from their clients. By implementing security, they maintain order within the organization (ibid.).

In the public sector, there are three types of supervision functions within social work. Starting with administrative supervision, characterized as management and accountability; educational supervision is used for training and development; supportive supervision provides support and professional development (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). These types of supervision are implemented both in informal (inside or outside the social work setting) and formal context (management, appraisal) (Collins, 2008) .

The book *Building Solutions in Child Protective Services*, by Berg and Kelly (2000) provides an extended guide in how support should be practice in Child Welfare Agencies. According to them, each Child Welfare Organization is composed by social workers and their supervisor who support each other to promote job satisfaction. Starting with their colleagues, social workers share concerns and experiences to help

each other both in informal and formal context. By working together in peers, social workers are able to find solutions by consulting each other (Lipsky, 2010). Furthermore, by exercising informal support (Collins, 2008), the social workers develop professional performance inside their agencies (Berg and Kelly, 2000).

Supervisors are valuable instruments of support. Portrayed by a social worker with greater experience in the field and trained in supervision theory, they provide administration, education and support to their staff in both formal and informal context (Bradley and Höjer, 2009).

In a formal context, support is divided into three categories: case consultation, supervision and external supervision. According to Berg and Kelly (2000), the first category is composed by the direct supervisor and a group of social workers. It is characterized as space of mutual support by postulating solutions to difficult cases provided by the staff. Additionally, case consultation is also an example of supervision portrayed to develop “staff development as continuing educational activities” (2000, p. 225). Described as of on-going training where social workers are able to re-experiences their previous knowledge and develop new skills to approach their clients (ibid.). Personal time with the supervisor is another example of formal support. In Sweden, supervision is described as a continuous process that integrates all the aspect of social work practice to help the worker reflect on their job (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Therefore, it reduces stress and promotes job satisfaction. On the other hand, Sweden has develop a new type of supervision by using the psychotherapy model (Bradley et al., 2010). Described as external supervision, the agencies hired an external professional to provide educational and emotional support to their social workers (Bradley et al., 2010).

On the other hand, Penélope Welbourne (2012, p. 222) provides several methods in how general support should be conducted:

- Informal discussions with colleagues to share ideas and offer support, including emotional support.
- Supervising other workers, providing a positive learning environment in supervision, promoting attendance at training events for other workers.
- Presentations to share information, for example, with a team or group of colleagues, after carrying out a piece of research into a particular issue, attending a conference, a study visit to another country or area, or other experience that expanded the presenter’s knowledge.
- Disseminating the results of innovative practice; trying out an approach new to the agency and sharing the outcome.
- Providing formal structured training sessions about a particular topic: traditional ‘training’ experiences.
- Providing ‘shadowing’ experiences; co-working with less experienced practitioners.
- Mentoring.



## 2.3 Coping

### 2.3.1 Concept of coping

There have been many theories of defining coping strategies. Initially, used in psychology, as a cognitive process of defence; the concept itself has been evolving over the years. Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141) define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person”. Within this perspective, they describe the process as functions of different strategies used by individuals to face difficult situations influenced by the environment and the person’s properties. Their theory has been adapted into different areas of social sciences where they discuss the process of coping on individuals facing different situations (Anderson, 2000; Lee, Forster, and Rehner, 2011). Therefore, coping consist as process where resources, such as interpersonal and environmental, help individual to face stressful situation (Anderson, 2000). In this thesis, the concept of coping will be used to understand how and if social workers can work with difficult work-task in Child Welfare Organizations.

### 2.3.2 Coping Resources and Coping Strategies

#### 2.3.2.1 Resources

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) concluded that every human being have coping resources to face their problems. It answers the question “What can I do?” (1984, p. 157). Influenced by the environment and the person’s characteristic, resources are the answers of what can the person do to overcome their problem.

Starting with the personal characteristics, resources can be found within the person health and energy (psychical resource) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, positive beliefs, social skills and problem solving, psychological control, self-esteem are other types of coping resources that the individual use to cope (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Taylor and Stanton, 2007). The environment also influences the individual’s frame of mind. To be able to have social support (emotional, informational, tangible) and material resources (goods, services and money), people are able to overcome their problems (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In general, coping resources have a positive effect on the person psychical and psychological health (Taylor and Stanton, 2007).

#### 2.3.2.1.1 Strengths as Resources

Strengths are also used as coping resources<sup>7</sup>. Defined as a process where every individual has strengths to face their problems; it provides a gamma of resources from individualism to community level to find a new perspective to see a negative situation. Everyday life mobilize people’s strengths (talents, knowledge, capacities, resources) and promotes a better quality of life where “privileges accomplishments over failure, health over disease, and resources over deficits” (Saleebey, 2006, p. xiv).

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<sup>7</sup> Strengths are the key resources develop by Saleebey and his theory about the strength perspective. Applied in different type of social problems, strength perspective is an important key to develop resilience (Saleebey, 1996). In this study the concept of strength would be used as an example of coping resources that individuals develop to challenge uncertainty.



Strengths can be found within the individual (feelings, qualities, talents, spirituality, pride) and the environment (culture, community) (Saleebey, 2006). Therefore, they are the key of the healing process to promote resilience (skills to overcome uncertainty) and membership (member of a community) (Saleebey, 1996).

### **2.3.2.2 Coping Strategies**

Lazarus and Folkman, (1984) explained that resources provide multiple functions of coping. As individuals, human are able to use different techniques to overcome their problems. By using emotion focused forms of coping, the person is able to conduct a cognitive reappraisal characterized of changing a thought to create a new emotion (ibid.). Put differently, by changing negative thoughts into positive, the person is able to experience positive emotions. Furthermore, behaviour strategies (exercise, meditation, etc.) are a type of emotion-focused strategies that help individuals to get their mind out of the problems (ibid.). The objective of this approach is to maintain hope and optimism. Other type of individual coping function is the problem-focused approach (ibid.). Characterized as a method that identifies the problem, creates alternative to answer them and act on these solutions. Furthermore, it focuses on the environment; hence, working together, with the emotion focused form, these two processes can facilitate each other coping process.

#### **2.3.2.2.1 Resilience as an outcome of coping strategies**

The concept of resilience<sup>8</sup> has been study in many different areas of social science. Resilience is the consequence of individuals' attributes (feelings, qualities, talents, spirituality, pride) to overcoming the odds and being successful with their lives despite their negative experiences (Fraser, Galinsky, and Richman, 1999; Saleebey, 2006). Furthermore, other factors such as the environment (community and culture) have an impact in how individuals become resilient (Saleebey, 2006).

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<sup>8</sup> Resilience is described as a process of positive adaptation among adversity (Gilligan, 2004). Defined either as a "process" or an "outcome" (Adamson, Beddoe, and Davys, 2014; Fraser, Galinsky, and Richman, 1999; Ungar and Liebenberg, 2009), resilience has been discussed in different literatures. In this research, resilience will be used as an outcome of coping strategies where individuals use their resources and strengths to become resilient.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The goal of this research is to learn how NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies face new challenges, coping strategies and the role of different support systems. Therefore, the objective of the study is to employ an exploratory research about challenges, coping strategies and support systems inside Child Welfare Agencies. Categorized as a qualitative research method (Bryman, 2012), this thesis has the goal to produce knowledge by exploring the description and understanding of a social event concentrated in Child Welfare Agencies (Stebbins, 2001). By studying narratives, diverse stories and conversations engage the researcher to understand their participants way of social life around their environment (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999). Put different, this investigation observes the world through the participants interpretations (epistemology) and their outcomes by their interactions (Bryman, 2012).

A group interview and five qualitative interviews were conducted in order to gather data. These forms of data collection were necessary in order explore the participants perception about the studied topic and support the researcher to gain detailed answers to compare them with previous theoretical concepts and previous studies (Bryman, 2012; Frey and Fontana, 1991). The group interview, characterized to involve several participants, is used to produce group interaction and interpretations about an specific event (Frey and Fontana, 1991). This type of interview was conducted in a Child Welfare Organization in Gothenburg. The individual interviews were also conducted in different Child Welfare Organization in Gothenburg and surrounding municipalities. Both types of interviews were directed to NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare Agencies. An interview guide was complied with a list of questions with specific topics for both the interview and group interview. To understand the participants narratives, other questions, that initially weren't in the guide, were used (Bryman, 2012). Writing field notes in a notebook during the conversations were important to gather important detailed information about their experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Furthermore, combined with the recordings they are essential instruments for later analysis.

As an outsider from these organizations and detached from the group under study (Labaree, 2002), practical knowledge was produced to understand more the social workers environments and feelings; therefore one can move forward to become an expert on the topic of matter (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Nevertheless, by experiencing different stories from the participants; one can say that you become a member of their setting and engage an understanding about their lives by participating in informal conversations.

### **3.1 Data Collection**

#### **3.1.1 Sampling Method**

##### **3.1.1.1 Finding the participants**

Literature provides information on why many people quit their jobs on the child welfare agencies in Sweden (Bradley et al., 2010; Campanini et al., 2012; Perlinski, 2010;

Tham, 2007). Furthermore, with the lack of statistics and systematic evaluation in English (Cocozza and Hort, 2011; Tham, 2007), there is no information about how long social workers stay in their jobs.

In order to learn from the new comers experiences, different meetings with the supervisor were done to find solutions. To initiate, it was decided that the participants of the interviews must have the following requirements: less than two years of experience inside Child Welfare agencies and only had the social work's bachelor degree. Therefore, it was necessary to find the participants that qualified as requirement to answer the research questions. For this purpose, previous literature was used to understand the context. By reviewing articles and books the concept of Newly Qualified Social Worker came out as an example. This notion has been used as an international recognized term in different literature. By explaining the process of transition from the university to a specific work place (Kearns and McArdle, 2012); the concept has been used to understand the practices and experiences of this professionals on a period of the first year of their work environment (Bates et al., 2009). According to Bergmark and Lundström (2007), child welfare is the biggest field of social work practice in Sweden. Therefore, many NQSW's enter this ground to find suitable jobs. Furthermore, previous literature explained that the only requisite to enter this field was to have a social work degree (Wiklund, 2007); therefore, is possible for any social worker to enter this job. In other words, qualified social workers are able to enter this field. However, as previous literature explained, they lack practices in how to address difficult situations such as child welfare (Cocozza and Hort, 2011). Considered as the NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies, they are the targets for this research.

The department of social work of Gothenburg University opens many doors for students to find answers to their concerns. By using purposive sampling, a type of non-probability form of sampling, one is possible to find participants that are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). This type of sampling is characterized as a process where the researcher selects the participants that fit the standards of the study ("Purposive sampling - Oxford Reference," 2015). In this sense, snowball sampling technique, a type of purposive sampling, was used to find participants that are relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, one is able to contact some of the professors by email and ask them information about the situation and if they can provide assistance in linking to people working in Child Welfare agencies. Furthermore, students are also important resources for this study: by either working in the same field or doing interviews with social workers in the same agencies, they provided emails of supervisors and social workers that forwarded the information to other participants.

Emails helped exchange information with the participants. It was used to provide information about the date, time and place where the interviews were conducted. From all the social workers interviewed on this research, a worker from an organization mentioned that there are two other social workers that would like to participate in this research; therefore, they were not contacted by email.

A total of eight social workers were interviewed for the study: five individual interviews and a group interview with three persons were conducted. Initially the idea was to only use individual interview; however while contacting the participants, one of the interviewee explained that other two social workers will like to participate; however due to lack of time and availability they were only able to meet once. Therefore, it was

decided to interview them as a group. Usually, group interviews are conducted with more than seven participants. One can say that three persons are not enough to be considered as a group. However, while conducting the group interview, it was possible to gather depth information about the topic. In this sense, the participants were able to interact with each other and discuss as a member of a group (Bryman, 2012). Also, participants were able to stimulate each other by asking themselves questions and the role of the interviewer was only limit to ask questions and observe (Frey and Fontana, 1991). Therefore, exchanging their experience with each other, it helps the researcher to gather important information about the topic and compare it with previous literature.

In many qualitative researches it is very difficult to determinate how many participants should be interviewed to achieve saturation (Bryman, 2012). However, since this thesis is characterized as an explorative research; the idea to find participants was to understand their experiences rather than make a global generalization. While conducting the first two interviews and the group interview (total of five participants) depth information about the context was gathered. At the same time, the last three interviews provided the same response as the initial one, making possible to develop generalization about this specific case (Sandelowski, 1995).

### **3.1.1.2 The participants**

The participants consisted of eight people in total, and they work in different children welfare agencies within Gothenburg and surroundings municipalities. For the ethical consideration to maintain their information private, none of the organizations names or locations will be mentioned within the study. Likewise, since it was promised professional secrecy, anonymity, and confidentiality (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011), it is not possible to provide further detailed information about the participants themselves. However, in a general perspective it is possible to postulate some information about the participants:

- Only one participant is male while the rest is female.
- Five of the eight participants are recognized as NQSW's since they graduated less than a year from their bachelor degree; while the remaining three participants had graduated more than a year ago.
- Only one participant has more than a year of experience in the Child Welfare Agency, while the others have less than five months experience.

### **3.1.2 Instrument**

The research applied a semi-structured interview guide (see appendix 2) with a list of four introducing questions, five main questions, followed by eight probing questions for the interviewee reflects about the main topics. This guide was used for the individual's interview and the group interview. Constructed with the basis of the research questions and theoretical framework, it was possible to explore in depth the experiences of the participants. Usually, group interview and individual interview may differ when it comes to structure; however by using the same interview guide in the group interview, it was possible to compare different interpretations with other individual interview (Frey and Fontana, 1991). Therefore, it was possible to achieve saturation. In the interviews, different topics were discussed:

- ✓ After the introduction about the topic and providing them with information, the interview guide discusses topics about job experiences, years on the field and graduation process. Furthermore, a direct question was added to understand their experiences with the university and how it influenced on their knowledge about their job.
- ✓ The second part of the interview was directed to capture the experiences of the social workers in relation to the main research questions. These research questions were transformed into general thematic questions follow up by different probing questions to capture the respondent's main ideas. Lists of several themes were discussed. (See Interview guide in Appendix 2).

### 3.1.3 Interview Process

This research applied semi-structured questions in both group interview and individual interviews. During the entire process, the interviews were supposed to be a guide to find out their main challenges, coping strategies and organizational support. Minimum intervention was used, interviewees were given the opportunity to express themselves and keep the interview flowing its natural course.

In order to understand the characteristics of the stories provided by the participants, probing questions and interpretations were used by the author (Bryman, 2012). In different occasions, the interviewees found it difficult to express themselves in English; therefore, time was given to them to try to find ways to explain their ideas. Nevertheless, these limitations helped the study because the participants only talked about the main ideas and avoid any other type of subjects not related to the questions.

The participants showed a mix types emotions during the interview process. Feelings of sadness and annoyance were shown when asking about their main challenges and concerns about their work. It was visible in the way they expressed themselves. Nevertheless, their good experiences and hope helped them to feel happy. With laughs and smiles they were able to express their feelings of good experiences, support and hope for the future. They remained interested in the subject and they were able to express their concerns about the matter since it has been an on-going topic in the Swedish child protective system. Therefore, the interviews provided additional important information of this area.

#### 3.1.3.1 Limitations

It was very difficult to find statistics related to this field in English. As an international student with only general knowledge of the area and language limitation it is difficult to find suitable participants that are willing to speak in English, rather than Swedish. Also, organizational changes in the child welfare agencies were also a limit to access the participants, since they are having a busy schedule; therefore, finding participants was quite challenging. Most of the workers have a very busy agenda within their jobs. Furthermore, conducting an English interview was not something they felt very comfortable with. Therefore, some interviewee emailed that they weren't available at the moment. Timing was another problem, when making an appointment it was necessary to adapt to their schedule. Most of the respondents only wanted to be interviewed during working hours. Nevertheless, it was possible to find participants and make an appointment to conduct the study.

### 3.1.3.2 Conducting interviews

The interviews were conducted in five different social welfare organizations in Gothenburg and surroundings municipalities. They were usually performed in the participant's office; normally a comfortable quiet place where nobody will interrupt. Starting with a short introduction mentioning the objective of the study, getting to know each other and explaining the informed consent; a connection was formed between the two parties. After explaining the objective of the interview, the participants were asked if the information could be recorded and once they accepted the interview started with the general questions. Each interview lasted between 30 to 50 minutes in total and they were conducted in English. Sometimes, it was difficult for them to use some words in English; therefore rephrasing was used to help them to communicate better. In some interviews, finding the right word in English was difficult; therefore, participants used Swedish words. These words were later translated into English by the author. Nevertheless, the participants seem to be very motivated to express their feelings about their situations on their workplaces. Furthermore, to gain more information paraphrasing and using follow-up questions helped the author to gain a general idea of the topic. Participants are also expecting a copy of this thesis since it seems very interesting for them.

The group interview was conducted inside a social worker's office in one Child Welfare agency with a time frame of 55 minutes. Following the same procedure as the interviews, the professionals answered the questions. The difference was that the participants were able to discuss between themselves the different themes. With only limited participation from the researcher to guide the conversation, the interviewees were able to deliberate the topics as a member of a group (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, by only asking the questions and keeping a passive role by observing their reactions it was possible to explore depth information about the topic (Frey and Fontana, 1991). Additionally, as a group they were able to express themselves in English easier, knowing that they also speak Swedish and have the opportunity to translate for each other. Therefore, detailed information about the topic was gathered.

## 3.2 Methods of Analysis

### 3.2.1 Interview Analysis

Kvale, (2007) six steps of interview's analysis<sup>9</sup> explained how it is possible to understand the data for this research. By describing about their experiences in the child welfare organization, participants were able to express themselves and new information was gathered. Furthermore, different interpretations emerged from the participants' reflections. By rephrasing and asking questions it was possible to understand the meaning of what the participants describe in a specific situation. Therefore, the author was able to comprehend this social phenomenon.

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<sup>9</sup> Categorized as a process of six steps, this procedure helps to gather information. The first step is characterized where the interviewee describes their world. Follow up by discovering the meaning of their description. The third step is characterized when the interviewer interprets the meaning of what the participants expressed. Recording, transcription and deep analysis of the researcher is the main characteristic of step four. The fifth step is the re-interview, where the interviewee has access to the transcript and they can comment. The last step includes action, where interviewee is able to promote changes thanks to the information obtained from the transcript. (Kvale, 2007).



### 3.2.2 Transcription

The interviews and the group interview were recorded and transcribed. Considered as a “time consumed business” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 149), transcription can be difficult because each time is important to rewind the recorded to verify if everything is correct. Furthermore, grammar mistakes appear in the transcripts, since grammar problems appear in conversations. Therefore, it was necessary to address the grammars mistakes to organize the main idea. However, in general the transcripts maintain their original forms. The transcripts bring out the participants’ point of view from an specific topic; and related them from the researcher perspective it is possible to develop different types of information from the data (Kvale, 2007). Furthermore, by reviewing each transcript it was possible to develop codes for further analysis.

### 3.2.3 Thematic Analysis

Kvale (2007) defines coding as a process of categorization of specific themes. As key aspect of thematic analysis, it helps to construct an index with the central themes of sub-themes related to the interview (Bryman, 2012). Using the interviews questions (see Appendix 2), providing summaries from the participants answers and combining them with theories and literature; themes and sub-themes emerged from the data. In this sense, an analysis chart was constructed to summarize all the interviews. This chart examines the main idea of each question and provides “key words” with the page number of the interview. Within it, it was possible to identify the similarities and differences points of view of the participants. Furthermore, the use of repetition within the data was important to find the most important topics in the interviews (Bryman, 2012). Put differently, it was possible to find different interesting themes from their answers.

Main Questions	Participants									Theoretical Concepts	
	Questions	Interview 1	Interview 2	Focus Group	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Theories	Literature Review		
	Job										
	University Graduation										
	Time in The Job										
	Experience of university and working place										
	Experience in the institution										
	Challenges										
	Prepared for the challenges										
	Good experiences										
	Personal traits of coping										
	Coping as a Group										
	Coping with friends										
	Supervision										
	External Supervision										
Difficult question											
Other questions											
Notes											

Example of the Analysis Chart 1

After having the main ideas, another chart was created to review the most important information. It contains a summary of each question, the new “key words” that emerged, observations, theories and literature review. Compared to the previous one,

this new chart summarizes the main categories that had emerged from the data in relation to the research questions; therefore, it was used to generate significant findings to compared it with the literature that it has already been studied (Bryman, 2012; Kohler, 2008).

Questions	Main Summaries				
	Conclusions	Key Words	Observations	Theories	Literature Review
Job					
University Graduation					
Time in the Job					
Experience in the university and working place					
Experience in the institution					
Challenges					
Prepared for the challenges					
Good Experiences					
Personal traits of coping					
Coping as a group					
Coping with friends					
Organization Support					
Supervision					
External Supervision					
Notes					

Example of the Analysis Chart 2

After finding the main conclusions, similarities and differences of each question, it was possible to find themes related to the research questions. Therefore, new concepts and evidence emerged from the data was used to analyse the results.

### 3.3 Validity, reliability, and generalizability

Compared to qualitative studies, quantitative research has developed standardized criteria in how to measure validity, reliability and generalizability (Bryman, 2012). There has a lot of critics in relation to qualitative research since: it lacks reproducibility, builds on personal impression and is lacking generalizability (Mays and Pope, 1995). Nevertheless, to ensure rigour of this study is important to mention its potential and limitations.

The term reliability is used to understand if the study can be replicated (Bryman, 2012). In other words, if it is possible to adapt this research into another a similar context. Validity can be divided into two categorization: internal (good relationship between theories and ideas from the data) and external (if the findings can be generalized) (ibid.).

In qualitative research, such as this one, it is quite challenging to measure the level of trustworthiness of the validity and reliability. By using very few participants within the study, it affects the level of external validity of the research, making it difficult to generalize the results. Furthermore, replicating the study in the same social setting could be quite challenging, because society is in constant change (Bryman, 2012). Even though, similar studies might find parallel results, there isn't any singular rule to describe the human being (Feyerabend, 1988). Describe as individual, human beings are sources of emotions and ideas, therefore they change their world through their own



actions (Oquist, 1978); which means, as social actors, people construct their own reality.

Nevertheless, Bryman (2012) expresses that in order to compare qualitative studies with quantitative, it is important to mention the level of trustworthiness of the research. By using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability; it is possible to compare the study with quantitative criteria of validity, reliability and generalizability.

In this sense, transferability is parallel to external validity (Bryman, 2012). In this research it was necessary to dig deeply into the participants' point of view. It was quite difficult for them to express themselves in English; hence, by rephrasing and using follow-up questions, the interviewees were able to give more elaborate answers and examples. With the information obtained it was possible to acquire relevant information to compare it with theories and literature review to endorse the study trustworthiness. Furthermore, it also increases the credibility that is connected with internal validity (Bryman, 2012) and is characterized as a process of establishing trustworthiness of the findings. Nevertheless, the new information obtained in this research can't be officially generalized, but that doesn't mean that the knowledge obtain can't form part of a given field (Flyvbjerg, 2004). On the other hand, this study increases the dependability by sharing the analysis with the supervisor to establish trustworthiness in the results. Dependability is equivalent to reliability in quantitative studies (Bryman, 2012). By comparing information with the supervisor who also has written other articles related to the theme is possible to verify if the study can be replicate or not.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethics in social research respects the rules of professional associations that had formed ethical codes to follow when conducting studies with human subjects in different countries (Bryman, 2012; Homan, 1992). Within the study, the Swedish Research Council ethical guide was used to promote professional secrecy, anonymity, and confidentiality (see Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). Therefore, it was used to promote transparency in the research (Bryman, 2012).

The information gathered by the participants was quite delicate. In some interviews, the respondents express their feelings and concerns about their organizations, which could cause some type of harm (Bryman, 2012). By following the codes of handling research material (see Vetenskapsrådet, 2011, pp. 65–71) it was possible to get in agreement.

Starting with the informed consent, the participants were informed about the research project is part of an International Project of the University of Gothenburg, what are the main objectives and its purpose. It was also asked if the information could be recorded and transcribed to later be destroyed. To protect the participants' private lives and promote self-determination; secrecy, anonymity and confidentiality were also promised in the informed consent (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). Furthermore, it was informed that the interview was used for information to gather knowledge about the social workers experiences in Child Welfare agencies and that is only for research purpose and no name of organization would be mentioned. By approving the agreement an informed consent form was signed by the student, the supervisor and the participant.

The gathered data has been handled in privacy so no unauthorized person could access it. During the analysis, personal information about the participant or the organization was eliminated. Furthermore, all recordings will be destroyed after the research ends. Finally, the research was conducted only to gather information and no further intervention would be used to avoid any harm for the participants.

## **Chapter 4: Finding and Analysis**

The following chapter will go through the empirical data gathered to answer the three research questions of the thesis:

- What are the main challenges the NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies face?
- What are the coping strategies used by NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies?
- What kind of support do NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies receive from the organization?

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that some of the participants had problems to develop their ideas in English, which created a limitation to develop good extracts for analysis. Therefore, quotations were selected based on the descriptive characteristics of the participants' descriptions. In this sense, some participants' ideas were used more frequently than others. Nevertheless, all informants will be cited in this chapter for deeper understanding about their experiences.

By using direct quotations from the informants and comparing it with previous research and theories, new types of headings and sub-headings were created to indicate the main ideas of the results. Differences and similarities from the data collected will be used for analysis and discussion through the following sections.

### **4.1 Challenges**

The objective of this section is to discuss about the main challenges the workers are facing in their work place. NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies face constant challenges through their transition from students to their work life. Lack of previous training and only receiving general information from their universities (Cocozza and Hort, 2011; Frost et al., 2013; Khoo et al., 2002; Sandstrom, 2007) are one of the main challenges these workers are facing. Simultaneously, organizational bureaucracy during the last years has created many problems in the level of professionalism of social work practice in different fields, such as Child Welfare agencies (Healy and Meagher, 2004). Therefore, this affects their relationship with their clients making it difficult to gain their trust, making their job more challenging (Tham and Meagher, 2009).

#### **4.1.1 Transition from University to Job**

##### **4.1.1.1 Voices about insufficient practical experiences**

According to Sandstrom (2007), in Sweden the social work degree requires 3.5 years of study where students learn their skills to become professionals in different areas of social work practice. The participants were aware that the university teaches them techniques to address diverse social problems and they agree that in 3.5 years of studies is not enough for them to comprehend the diversity of social work practice. While working in child welfare organizations, new professionals are conscious that their

reality is classified as a learning experience. The university can't provide all the information.

You cannot educate all that in Gothenburg or any university. You need to be in place, in organizations to know how. (Informant 2)

I don't think school can prepare you for that. It would take you 40 years. (Informant 3)

Therefore, they mention the importance of their field placement in this specific ground. By gathering experiences in same organizations, workers are able to understand how these institutions work.

From the university I have the thinking. I have the thinking in how to do it and how to think. How to think about risks of growing up like this or how people in crisis can act or you know. Information about the human being. But the investigation tools are so much about the methods or working in different systems or how type and everything. There is not time at the education to get that, so you need to get it at the place you are going to work. And if you are going to do that, you need time and for me it was a good idea because I did my practice here for 20 weeks and I had a lot of time to build up that. (Informant 2)

Described in terms of "craftsmanship" (Perlinski et al., 2013, p. 512) practical knowledge is based on everyday experience. With five months of experiences in the field, students are able to specialize in an specific area of social work practice (Frost et al., 2013). Hence, they enter to a specific job in municipal social services (Campanini et al., 2012). However, field placement is only limited to one place:

I can come here just to visit but not to practice. You can choose to be here, but I wanted to try to be a *kurator* (hospital social worker / social nurse) in a hospital. So if I wanted to go the hospital I couldn't go here also. I can only choose one practice and it was six months. (Informant 5)

With many opportunities to explore, students are only limited to choose one area in specific to develop their practice knowledge. Previous research agreed that the students in Sweden are only able to do one field placement during their career (Frost et al., 2013). Furthermore, since social work practice is so diverse, there has been limited knowledge about its implication for professional development (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007) making the education more general without any type of specialization that engage professionals to work in Child Welfare agencies (Cocozza and Hort, 2011).

#### 4.1.1.2 General Education

In 1999, the Bologna Process Agreement was characterized to promote employability in universities in different European countries (including Sweden) (Frost et al., 2013; Sandstrom, 2007). New professionals are able to find suitable jobs in different parts of Europe and Sweden. The indicated creates problems for the new professionals when entering their specific field. Through their experience as students, the social workers explain that their universities train them to enter different work places. One social worker concluded that:

The education you get is very general because you are supposed to fit in many kinds of jobs. You aren't only educated yourself into being a social worker that is taking care of children. You can be so much, so it is very general. So it doesn't do everything for you. It doesn't prepare you for everything in this job. (Informant 3 from the group interview)

By having a short period of time for their studies, participants established that the university focus more on theories rather than practice.

I think with my education is too much scientific work. You write your essay twice, your B and a C essay and courses before that I think is unnecessary because we need more practice in how to meet people, how to interact with people. More like how to meet people in difficult situations. Which I think is too much theory and not enough practice. (Informant 1 from group interview)

A preceding study corresponds that the subjects taught in Swedish universities integrated other types of social sciences subjects making the education more complex and challenging as time progress (Frost et al., 2013). In this sense, students felt that they are very inexperienced to enter a work placement. According to the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004) fieldwork curriculum in social work practice should ensure that their students are able to develop their skills and knowledge; should have a complete duration and diverse opportunities so students are able to practice; finally, there should be partnership between the university and the agency. Nevertheless, Sandstrom (2007) concludes that these regulations have not been well debated in Sweden and unions have little impact in universities programs. In reality, universities use field placement practice to enhance the students' skills. Yet, without regulations it makes more difficult for universities to promote more practical knowledge to their students.

On the other hand, previous research clarified that during their studies, social workers are able to acquire three different types of knowledge: theoretical knowledge (theories about persons and social works role); factual knowledge (understanding laws, social politics); and, finally, practical knowledge (new knowledge acquired in practice) (Perlinski et al., 2013). Furthermore, the national goals for the social work degree requires that students are able to gain "knowledge and understanding; skills and competencies and values, ethics and professionalism" (Sandstrom, 2007, p. 62). The respondents agree with this statement, especially when it comes in the field of laws and theories. One participant concluded that social laws are part of the teachings students receive in their bachelor:

We were well educated in the school about the law, about what kind of law to act upon. And we also have one law that tell us what bureaucracy to do for example: "If you get a paper here in the reception, you have to stamp it because this is bureaucracy. You have to file it in the computers. All those kind of standardizations you have to do" And I was pretty comfortable on that, because of the education. (Informant 2)

Simultaneously, many of them approved that universities provide the material in how to use the theories while working with their clients.

The university have helped me with tools to think in theories and thinking to, to understand people in different situations in life. Young people, old people, dysfunctional people, eh! All kinds of people, immigrants' people, people with problems with drugs or alcohol. (Informant 2)

Nevertheless, this research concludes that after many years of experiences in work environment, the concepts and theories acquired at school tend to disappear.

#### **4.1.1.3 Gap between theories and practice**

In general terms, participants agreed that their main challenges on the university were the lack of practice and too much theory. However, on two different occasions, the workers mentioned that at one point in their future they are not going to talk about theories:

I remembered when we were visiting different working places, I don't know if it was the second semester or something like that and we asked the people: "what kind of theory are you using?" Because we thought that they were actually thinking on theories. And is a gap there. But I also think it is important to have the theory because you have it somewhere here (*she pointed her head*) and you use it even though you are not really aware sometimes. (Informant 2 from group interview)

In this sense, when they want to use theories to discuss their current job, social workers can only rely on their former classmates in the university.

I have contact with two students from my time as student and they are working with different jobs, different organizations but we talk the same kind of language since we studied together: about the theories. Because nobody here talks about theories because that is something you read at the university and in three years I am not going to talk about theories neither, I think. If you don't keep studying or keep reading or you know... Get input with the theories or the studies. (Informant 2)

According to Al-Ma'seb, Alkhurinej, and Alduwaihi, (2013), within social work there has always been a gap between theories and practices because four reasons: (1) the curriculum helps students to develop new ideas of practice in their work, however as time passes they only practice the information gained in their studies; (2) the job challenge and requirements does not allow new workers to develop new theories in their organizations; (3) not having a clear job description prevents professionals to expand their knowledge; and finally, (4) the workers might not be interested to expand their knowledge. In this sense, children welfare agencies lack of what Hasenfed (2010) discussed about the development of moral work; where organizations adapt to changes to increase moral entrepreneurship.

I think that is sad because I think is one of the most important thing in this work is to stay alert and to get input from the university, to get input from researchers. What is the latest? What do they say about Child Protection these days? What is a good way to help people? What's is the new research about this? And, how can we explain this? I think you have to stay updated. (Informant 2)

## 4.1.2 Work environment challenges

### 4.1.2.1 Administration

Different types of specializations are developed in Child Welfare Agencies. Divided by diverse units of assessment and treatment; clients are placed in groups or by the type of social problems they have (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007). As social workers, the majority of the participants were hired to do assessments with the children and their families. Characterized as a job that works in partnership with other institutions, the social worker is responsible to investigate the child's situation and make a report on a short period of time for further intervention (Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999).

Here at my job I am a social worker and I... Oh! I don't know that word. You know investigate when someone's call me or someone calls my colleague and say: "I am worried about this children". And then, in four months I can talk to the children, talk to the children's parents and other important person in the children's life, you know, to create a picture of the situation of the child and maybe we can help the family and the children in some way. (Informant 4)

Other type of occupation mentioned by the professionals was *Barnsekreterare* (child secretary). By working in partnership with volunteers (foster family, contact person or contact family); social workers are responsible to provide practical information, support

and advice to help them to take care the child that has been taken out of home (Hessle and Vinnerljung, 1999).

I am working with [---] With the social services and my role here is to work with children in placement. [---] Children being placed with different families because they can't live with their biological parents and I am their contact in social services. So I seek to their needs and whatever they need help with. [---] Their parenthood is like shared in three: so the social services are one part and the family, where they being placed are one part and the biological parents are one part. So we split the parenthood, and I am the part from social services. (Informant 1)

One of the main challenges that the participants are facing is the bureaucracy provided within their work. The implementation of the New Public Management has affected the level of professionalism of social work during the last years. By privatizing the public services, social work practice has been characterized to be more administrative; therefore, it is more about what can be measured, management control and competition (Berg et al., 2008; Bradley and Höjer, 2009; Healy and Meagher, 2004). Furthermore, as part of the labour market, participants express that their job is to promote production rather than support their clients:

There is a lot of administration that we need to do. So we are sometimes more social administrators than social workers I would say. Because is a tendency in the society that when you are working in production or whatever you have to evaluate what is efficient and that same kind of thinking has enter in the welfare sector and is not the same when you work with people. You always need to have evidence to see if this method works, you need to evaluate how many visitors and bla, bla, bla! (Informant 2 of group interview)

By promoting economic thinking inside the organizations, workers are facing many challenges within their jobs. From this perspective, to avoid any other type of extra cost inside the institutions, aside from their professional role as social workers, the professionals had to conduct many different kinds of work that are not related to their field, instead of hiring new personnel.

The problem is that we have too much administration; we have too much to write with, too much stuff that is put in the social worker instead of hiring administrative social worker that can write and stuff like that. So we are both social workers and secretaries. (Informant 1 of group interview)

Additionally, learning the computer program has become challenging for the workers. According to the participants, it is their job to document everything they have done with the families inside a database. Consider as time consuming, workers expend a lot of hours typing, which creates problems for them:

Because that is what we basically do: "Write! Write! And Write!" and then we go and meet people and then we go "Write! Write! And Write!" So, yeah! That is what I have to do. (Informant 3)

Preceding researchers had agreed that the New Public Management had affected the deprofessionalization of social work practice. According to Lipsky (2010), social workers are considered as "street level bureaucrats" because it is their job to work directly with citizens and use their discretion in their work. Nevertheless, Hasenfeld (2010), developed the concept of "diagnosis" (2010, p. 19) inside human services organizations in order to determinate the type of guidelines and rules that professionals most follow while addressing a situation. And while working inside the agencies, social workers are responsible to follow the rules that the organization provides (document everything); making it more difficult for them to exercise their freedom and gather knowledge to develop new ideas for the future (Healy and Meagher, 2004; Lipsky,



2010). Participants express their concerns with this issue, because as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this creates a gap between their own knowledge and the work organization since workers are supposed to follow the agencies rules (Al-Ma'seb et al., 2013).

It is like you are putting things in boxes like: "This is right. This is wrong". But, what happens with the things that are in between? That is not what this work is about. It is very box wise. Because we have like: "this is what is suppose to be good for the child. This is what suppose to be good for parents. How they suppose to raise them" But, what about culture? I mean, don't we take away their basic about their human being? Their backgrounds, their individuality. I think is hard because you came into this situation were we don't get to stop and think about these things. You just are: "Ok, so show me what I am suppose to do and then Ill do it." (Informant 3)

#### 4.1.2.1.1 The Organizations

Being new in a new work placement is quite challenging. But it is more difficult if you don't acquire the proper training that they can provide you, and that is some of the problems that new workers are facing in their organizations. By receiving different cases in her first date of work, a participant had to figure out what to do with them:

The first day I got 13 cases. She was like: "Here you have" "Ok, what I am going to do with this?" "Ah! You do this, you do this and you do this." And I was: "Oh, ok!" So I took a lot of own responsibilities and ask colleagues. (Informant 5)

Precedent studies established that organizational changes had affected social work practice within these institutions. With the lack of organizational and professional commitments, the social workers experience high levels of stress (Tham, 2007). Furthermore, with poor education these workers assume a role that is very challenging for them to handle (Cocozza and Hort, 2011). According to research, agencies use a lot of money on introductory programs for their new staff (Healy et al., 2009) and the pressure of social services are increasing each year (Tham and Meagher, 2009). Nevertheless, another research provided information that most of the social workers lack on training in how to conduct their jobs (Khoo et al., 2002). Furthermore, the majority of workers that are hired are new and lack of experiences since having the social work degree is only requisite enter this field (Campanini et al., 2012; Tham, 2007).

Having strong relationship with colleagues is one of the keys to develop positive experience within the organization. Nevertheless, the lack of support from peers creates negative emotional consequences (stress) for the social worker (Mor Barak et al., 2006; Tham and Meagher, 2009). In general terms, the workers express that there are always difference in opinion with colleagues. But, sometimes they experience lack of peer support making their jobs more difficult.

To be honest, first when I got here I felt very alone. [---] The people that were here in this working place. I mean, some people that left and two of them were helping me in the beginning but then they left so I was basically quite alone [---] I was having a hard time thinking if I had somebody to back me up. Because I was afraid to ask people for help because I felt like they found it annoying (Informant 3)

The lack of colleagues support are examples of absence of organizational and professional commitment (Tham, 2007). Furthermore, this example shows the difficulties a newcomer find in the organization: low status of entrance and different obstacle from the organizations, social workers experience a high level of job



dissatisfaction which creates health difficulties and the increase of the feeling of leaving their jobs (Bradley et al., 2010; Perlinski, 2010; Tham, 2007).

Another problem that participants mentioned about organization is that it has been going through many modifications, therefore, it creates complications at the moment of helping the children and families. According to one participant, there are problems in addressing responsibility for a specific situation:

As saying in Sweden, “when something is falling between the chairs”. I don’t know if you heard that. Some cases are like falling between the chairs because the people on the chairs are saying: “Is not on my desk. “No! Is not on my desk neither! And it falls because is not in my job to do this or is not in their job to do it. Then we say: falls between the chairs [---]. Inside this organization we have different bureaucracy problems and, for example: “I investigated how the kid is developing or feeling. And you have parents who are separated and they are fighting about where should this kid go? Where should this kid live? If the kid lives here most of the time, I need money from you and bla, bla, bla...” Some practical discussions, practical conflicts, that is not in our desk [---]. We have a department here working when parents are angry or who is going to take care of the kids. And the kid also has the right to a mother and a father, but sometimes for some reason, maybe, maybe just the mother is taking care of the kid and the father doesn’t have the right on the paper, but he has right as a father. So, when there is a practical issue that is not in our desk, it can be problems that can go to other parts in this organization. And they say: “No! Is not ours neither!” And then you fall between the chairs. There are different reasons why? But that is a little bit frustrating when you feel that something is falling between the chairs and you can do nothing about it. But you try. (Informant 2)

The previous quotation provides a thick description of what Tham (2007) describes as a lack of organizational and professional commitment. Furthermore, Mor Barak et al., (2006), add that non-supportive organizational climate, develops low levels of organizational commitment; making more difficult to the social workers to find support and address the clients needs. Cahalane and Sites (2008), communicated that a climate is characterized as an environment where employees work. By having a climate attributed by lack of support, social workers develop poor relationship with their clients. According to Hasenfeld, (2010), human services organizations had the objective to develop moral work by using policies and control mechanisms. Nevertheless, when there are different obstacles from the organizations (Perlinski, 2010) and lack of colleague support (Tham and Meagher, 2009); it is indeed no wonder why “everything falls between the chairs”.

Another challenge provided by the data was that organizations only offer their services on weekdays. According to Lipsky (2010), professionals must address their organizational rules; therefore, they are limited to provide further services outside their regulations; which creates a problem for the clients and the worker.

Another example if we see that there is a family who needs support by people coming home to them and help them to develop their skills to be a parent, we can only offer that from Monday to Friday. So people cannot have problem Saturday and Sunday because we cant support them. (Informant 2)

Participants also agreed that they are struggling because they have many clients with difficult cases and too little personnel to help them.

The challenge is that we have a lot to do. We are very busy and the cases are tough. There is a lot of violence in the families. And we need to be more investigators here at work because we have too many cases per investigators. So we are not able to make in the right time. (Informant 5)

Moreover, they all agreed that is impossible to treat each family the same since each of them have different backgrounds.

People are complex and if I have a child that maybe fights with the other kids at school and I have another kid that fight with kids at school, their problem are not the same because they have different backgrounds. (Informant 3)

Making a life changing decision is also challenging. According one participant, she feels that it is very difficult to find a solution to the family problems, because each decision has consequences; therefore, she feels insecure about her decision:

If we decide maybe this child should not go home to the parents because he get problems at home. I decide to remove the children, is it the right choice? Is it the wrong choice? You know, every choice you make that effects on children life. (Informant 4)

All these previous circumstances create problems when addressing their clients. Many times, clients call asking for help and sometimes they get very angry because the workers aren't available for them all the time.

So I feel, and I think of a lot of people who have a lot of clients feel the same way: they don't have the time they would like to have. And also that makes many clients angry like: "what haven't you called? What haven't you done that? What haven't you done this?" And I am like: "Sorry, sorry! I don't have the time". (Informant 1 from group interview)

Sometimes, facing some clients creates many problems to the social workers. They don't like to work with all of them. According to one participant, social workers are not always comfortable working with the parents, because they bring up other marital problems not related to their child's safety:

About a year ago I had this family where the mother and father were acting like two big children, and they are grown ups! Like 15 years older than me, they had three children that were really feeling so bad. It was so bad! And the parents were divorced. And every time we met the father he was: "yes! She is like this! And bla, bla, bla!" And when I met the mother it was like: "he does this and bla, bla, bla!" And I was so frustrated! And I was like you have children together, you need to cooperate and you need to do this and they were like bibibibi! (*Informant arguing with the hands*). And then you get so annoyed because I am sitting with two grown ups that are like old as my parents and I understand better than they do. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Obtaining the client trust is the key of a successful work (Perlinski et al., 2013). All the participants agreed that helping the children is their first priority; therefore, they feel happy when they are able to assist them. Nevertheless, one researcher concludes that the organizational climate is one of the main causes of stress related disorders. By perceiving a stressful work environment characterized with many administrative regulations, social workers develop dissatisfaction in their job since they are having too much paperwork and less time with their clients (Mor Barak et al., 2006). Additionally, this generates insecurity for the workers to face their clients (Tham, 2007). Nevertheless, compared with another study that concluded that social workers are victims of clients threats and violence (Tham, 2007); the participants never expressed any signs that considered that their relationship with the families was based on violence. Their main challenges are based on administrative work that develops a lot of stress. Many of the participants agreed that their job is very stressful.

It is hard when you are new because is a very stressful job. A lot of things are going on, it's a lot of think about. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Furthermore, for newcomers in general terms everything about the institution is a challenge because they feel that they are still learning.

Everything is kind of a challenge. It is challenging to learn the computer system. You know, everything is little bit of a challenge. (Informant 1)

In many of the interviews, participants agreed that these organizational challenges create instability in their jobs. Ergo, it is the main cause of turnovers and difficulty of finding new professional to cover the vacant place.

Now that so many people had quit here our boss is trying to recruit new people and there is not much people applying the job. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Media pressure is also one of the causes of turnover. According to one of the interviewee, in the Swedish society, the child welfare agencies has been victims of critics and negative opinion:

There is a negative picture in the media now that working with Child Protection is hard, we don't have the right tools, we don't have a good salary, we have too many clients, we are too few people working with this. And that is sometimes true. (Informant 2)

Previous research acknowledge that in Sweden, the same as UK, child welfare has been negatively criticised by the media (Tham and Meagher, 2009). Earlier investigations agreed that level of professionalization of social work practice has been under criticism, especially when it comes to child welfare (Cocozza and Hort, 2011). Social Workers are victims of many difficult situations of organizational challenges (inadequate training, lack of support, bureaucracy) (Cocozza et al., 2006; Perlinski, 2010; Tham, 2007). As result, high levels stress disorders, burnout and emotional exhaustion are the outcomes of this problems, proceed with high levels of turnovers in the child welfare agencies (Tham, 2007; Tham and Meagher, 2009). Therefore, the future of child welfare agencies in Sweden is still ambiguous.

## 4.2 Coping Strategies

Social workers face many challenges inside their organizations. Yet, as human beings, they are able to find interpersonal and environmental resources (Anderson, 2000) to move forward into the future to create hope for children in need. The objective of this section is to discuss the coping strategies developed by the social workers. Divided into two types of resources: personal characteristics and environmental; social workers are able to develop multiple functions of coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984); hence, they are able to become resilient.

### 4.2.1 Personal Resources

Within their personal characteristics, human being can develop different kinds of resources to cope. They can be found in the personal characteristics and energy of individuals (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Therefore, people are able to develop strengths. In his studies, Saleebey (2006) established the concept of *strength* as talents, knowledge and resources the each person has to develop a qualitative live. These strengths create coping strategies to help the individual to overcome different circumstances (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Since being a social worker in a Child Welfare Agency is a demanding job, professionals had developed personal strategies to

take care of themselves. During their interview, they were asked if they were prepared to face the challenges their jobs provided and most of them referred to answer with positive outcomes by giving examples of what they do care of themselves.

According to the participants, to work in this type of job is important to have a personality that is able handle stressful situations. Also, separating work life from their private life is one of the keys of coping.

I am relatively stable, I am relatively happy about other things in my life. So I can focus on this work even if is hard. But I think that if you are having problems at home or something else. I don't think that you can handle this work. Because you need to be very stable, very sure of who you are and don't let it affect you and think of about this work that affect you in who you are in reality. Because this is my working place, this is my professional role but it doesn't mean that I am that same person at home. So if you have time at home that you can process these things and you are not stable, maybe going through a divorce or maybe going a lot of things at home. I think it would be too tough. But I think I was prepared because of my personality I can handle it. (Informant 3)

Guided by motivation to help people assist professionals in doing their best to promote solutions to their clients' problems. Furthermore, they are resources of hope; therefore, by witnessing the children transformation; social workers are able to overcome any type of problem within their field.

I had one kid that wasn't showing emotions, she was really scared showing emotions to anyone that was adult and then she cried in front of me and a relative and my heart just melted. I mean she was crying and you know and sad, but I was so happy inside. Because I think that it was very healthy for her. You know, being like... She wasn't in her feelings. She didn't have time to think about herself and when she finally got the chance to think about herself she started crying. And it was like: "huhh!" It was a relief for her. I mean is amazing. You get these small hands of situations like: "Ok, this was worth it! It took me four months, but this was worth it!" (Informant 3)

Having a sense of humour helps the professionals to view the problem from another perspective.

I think to keep the sense of humour is very important. It could be a rough humour when you are a social worker. I need that!!! (Informant 2 from group interview)

Personal qualities also influence on their coping skills. Many of the participants express that being organized helps them to prioritize their cases and have control over the situations.

I try to organize my work, so I have a lot of air in my schedule. So I can do my phone calls, I can do my typing in the computer. So I can stay stable and calm. And I think is a good way to meet people as well. (Informant 3)

With these resources, social workers develop coping strategies to focus on their job. Problem-focus approach, is one of the type of strategies they use. In this sense, they are able to identify their situation from another perspective and act to find solutions (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Earlier studies discussed that social workers enjoy their jobs despite its challenges, by using resources to overcome the odds and adapting successfully to negative life events and become resilient (Collins, 2008; Fraser et al., 1999). In his investigations, Collins (2008) confirmed that by helping others to have a better life is one of the many examples of coping strategies used by social workers. Furthermore, he describes that social workers have hardiness and self-esteem within their personality that makes them resilient. Having optimism about the future of the

children are also one example of resources that the social workers used in order to expect good outcomes rather than negative (Taylor and Stanton, 2007). Saleebey (2006) expresses that having sense of humour and being organized are personal qualities that individual develop in difficult situations in order to see the situation from another point of view. These strengths affect their coping process to improve their capacity to manage adverse situations and develop a healthy life (Taylor and Stanton, 2007). Therefore, they are the key to resilience (Saleebey, 1996).

Strengths can also come in the shape of daily life activities. Individuals are able to develop their own qualities and talents through their experiences and use them to minimize the negative aspect of their lives (Saleebey, 2006). By developing frequent routines, social workers are able to take care of themselves. Participants expressed the importance of exercise as a tool of coping.

First of all I try to not feel stress by preparing me with training. I, normally, a couple of days of week I go out for running and it is a good way for me to think, to prepare the next day work or to think about the work that has be done. (Informant 2)

Moreover, by distracting themselves from reality they are able to relax and enjoy their time.

I like to watch movies. Is like going into another world. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Sometimes just by being lazy and do nothing can be a good way to be healthy:

On Sundays I just lay in bed and do basically nothing. I just need that day to just relax and then go back to work on Monday. (Informant 3)

Exercise, distraction and laziness, are examples of resources used in behaviour strategies were the social workers are able to take their minds out of the problems (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). According to previous research, avoiding a problem decreases stress in specific situations (Taylor and Stanton, 2007). Nonetheless, this approach has been criticised over the years as a negative form of coping because individuals tend to separate themselves from the problems by doing other unhealthy activities (Collins, 2008). Previous studies supplement these findings by explaining that social workers using this type of strategy tend to increase emotional exhaustion (Anderson, 2000). So, when it comes to this type of strategy, is important to create a balance with other type of coping functions to avoid burnout.

#### **4.2.2 Environmental Resources**

The environment is a significant resource to develop coping strategies. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) social support and material resources influences the individual's mind. Furthermore, the community provide resources where people are able to share their lives stories and learn to overcome new problems (Saleebey, 1996).

Starting with closes friends; the social workers are able to do different activities to distract themselves. By using behaviour strategies in a social context, workers are able to establish informal support with their peers and friends and forget about the problems at work (Collins, 2008; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

I like to meet my friends and their babies, to see that there are babies that have a good family also. (Participant 5)

One interesting point that arose from the data is that many of the participants' friends were also social workers. By having similar situations, these professionals created bonds and became citizens of a same community (membership) (Saleebey, 2006).

Most of the people that I hang out with in my spare time are social workers as well. So we have a lot of discussion around work. And we are joking and having fun like we do with the colleagues here. (Informant 3 from group interview)

Additionally, the majority of these social workers are in a stable relationship. They mentioned the importance of having a partner to discuss their emotional problems where could express themselves and feel supported.

I also have an amazing husband that supports me. I don't know how he takes it. But when I come home and I am "rrrrr!!! Mad at something or sad about something. He is like: "Is ok!, Take a deep breath" He is very supportive. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Collins (2008), states that having emotional support is one of the main characteristics of problem-focus approach of coping. He justifies that by talking with their friends and family about their emotions help these social worker to develop moral support, sympathy and understanding. As part of social support, having emotional support reduces stress related disorder (Tham, 2007) and promote adjustment on the social workers life (Taylor and Stanton, 2007)

Other types of support were mentioned by the participants inside the organizations. By using different type of resources, child welfare organizations are able to use techniques of problem-solving approach (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) to create a resilient environment and promote emotional work (Hasenfeld, 2010). Nevertheless, this is discussed further in the next section.

## 4.3 Organizational Support and limitations

Human services organizations, such as Child Welfare Agencies, are characterized of developing moral work to maintain citizens well being. Introduced by Hasenfeld (2010), this concept describes how these organizations build rules to maintain validity of what they do. Therefore, social workers are responsible to abide the agencies policies in their day-to-day work. In the first section of this chapter, it was discussed that social workers are an example of street level bureaucrats. Lipksy (2010) expresses that this professionals use their own discretion to execute their job; nevertheless, they have to adapt to the organizations policies. Furthermore, he clarifies that the managers have the objective to achieve the agencies goals by being concerned of the social workers performance. Considered as the "ultimate street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 233), Child Welfare social workers are vulnerable to many obstacles. Therefore, the agencies use different strategies to increase the social work performance by using rewards, evaluations and supportive environment from the managers to increase job satisfaction (ibid.). The objective of this section is to explore how child welfare agencies develop different types of support to the social workers to help them address their challenges.

### 4.3.1 Organizational Climate

Organizational climate is defined as the environment where employees work. It characterized as a climate where workers experience relationship, supervision, support

and resources (Cahalane and Sites, 2008). By providing an environment of emotional work, through different mechanisms, such as supervision and socializations; social workers are able to make an assumption regarding controlling their feelings and promoting an atmosphere of moral solutions to their clients (Hasenfeld, 2010) .

Starting with their first involvement within the agencies, NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies are able to experience a supportive environment within their introduction. According to one participant, initially, the organization didn't provide long introductions and the social workers didn't feel prepared for the challenges they were facing:

When we started here in December it was another and I. We didn't have any introduction. So we were like: "you need to have an introduction in this place". And they changed their minds and started thinking about this. (Informant 5)

Nevertheless, it seems that this experience help this agency to endorse new rules to help the social worker to adapt to the new environment. Furthermore, other agencies provided extra introduction programs to help their staff. One participant explained that her introduction was unusual because it lasted more than a month:

I am having a really long introduction before having to do everything by myself. So I am very happy with that, because I wasn't expecting that when I graduated. In social services is often they have to start right with the job without introduction at all. And now I am going to have almost two months introduction. (Informant 1)

Moreover, some of the participants clarified that their beginning was quite easy because they didn't have a heavy workload:

I have been here for three weeks and my experience so far is very good in one way because I don't think I got a lot of workload things to do. They haven't put several investigations and several things to do on me. I had a very calm start and they haven't put many things on me. And that is very good. (Informant 3 from group interview)

Developing an easy start is one of the key processes of an organizational climate to promote positive outcomes. Using a strength-based approach (Saleebey, 1996) of training increases staff retention (Landsman, 2002). Furthermore, influenced by peer assistant, the social workers are able to learn how to survive in their agencies by developing techniques to address the problems (Collins, 2008; Lipsky, 2010). According to the participants, as beginners they have the right to receive a mentor who would guide them to adapt in the organizations:

Everybody who starts gets a mentor. I had a mentor here as well. Like you go to and ask questions and she shows me around and helped me. For this office is very important. Everybody has a mentor when they come here. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Lipsky (2010) explained that public services organizations must provide an environment where new staff is able to receive training. He delivers examples in how peer support and further education; help social workers to be able to cope when they are encountering difficulties. Additionally, Berg and Kelly (2000), suggest that social workers in this agencies learn from more from informal peer support and this kind of learning is very helpful; nevertheless, it has limitations. Therefore, they conclude that Child Welfare Agencies must provide different type of training and support system to promote resilience. Furthermore, both authors explained the difference between training and staff development. By providing continuing education growth, social workers are

able to learn new techniques to address their challenges. Also, previous studies expresses the importance of training and further education as an fundamental resource to job satisfaction (Frost et al., 2015; Welbourne, 2012). Therefore, it increases the social worker passion to their job.

They give you education here all the time. They train you. Basically while you are with your supervisor, but also when you have a something called (*computer's program*). The computer program that I was talking about. We have our administrator that she goes through in how it works. You have external education, where to go to psychotherapy and they basically give you a time out of this office and learn everything that has to do with this work. So I think is very nice from this working environment that you get really feel like they feel is important to get further education. (Informant 3)

Providing good organizational climate help the professional to experience fun in their jobs. According to many of the participants they enjoy their job because is fun:

But also is FUN! I wouldn't be here if it hadn't be a fun work [---] And you don't countdown the hours here. Is like: "Oh My God! I have to go home!" (Informant 1 from group interview)

Welbourne (2012) uses the term of "*emotional engagement*" (p. 26) as the sense of having fun while doing some activity. Furthermore, by being members of the same community, social workers develop personal qualities to enjoy their work (Saleebey, 2006). In the previous section it was mentioned about the importance of sense of humour as a resource to cope (Saleebey, 1996). By having fun at work, the professional cultivate coping strategies to identify the problems and find alternative solutions to them (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Just hanging out and having fun, the social workers are able to cope with their challenges.

Sometimes we have fun at work, in all the breaks and lunch everybody is talking and laughing even if it tough subjects we do for work. (Informant 3 of group interview)

Previous research clarified that social workers enjoy working in Child Welfare agencies thanks to their individual factors and organisational support (Collins, 2008). By having a organizational climate that uses constant support from administration, training and resources (Cahalane and Sites, 2008); social workers are able to grow and learn techniques to face new challenges (Berg and Kelly, 2000). So, it's no surprise why they have fun in their jobs.

### 4.3.2 Support Systems

Child Welfare agencies use different type of support systems to enhance work satisfaction. According to Berg and Kelly (2000) these institutions provide different resources to create an organizational environment characterized with support systems. Within their organizations, support comes in many different forms: starting with the workers' who share similar roles; social workers are able to create an environmental support characterized of mutual help (Berg and Kelly, 2000; Frost et al., 2015). Managers are also an important key of emotional work (Hasenfeld, 2010). By delivering information, staff meetings and care (Berg and Kelly, 2000); managers are able to sustain an effective organizational environment; therefore, it improve staff retention (Lee et al., 2011).

In their comparative studies about supervision in Sweden and England, Bradley and Höjer (2009) described that organizations provided three kinds of supervision:



administrative (management); educational (training) and supportive (personal and professional support). By implementing them with both informal and formal support (Collins, 2008); Child Welfare Agencies develop an organizational climate characterized with professional commitment, peer support and supervision (Lee et al., 2011).

#### 4.3.2.1 Informal Support

Collins (2008) confirmed that support systems in social work practice are divided into two categories: formal and informal. The latter one is characterized as a type of support that can occur inside and outside of the social workers agencies. Furthermore, it could be compared with Lazarus and Folkman (1984) concept of social support as a type or resource to cope with challenges.

Outside their agencies, social workers are able to discuss their own feelings and problems with their colleagues to receive advice and support:

We travelled a lot because most of the kids don't live in Gothenburg, they live all around and we have to drive a lot. So we talk a lot in the car about things that might be difficult or things that might be good or bad or whatever. So we have a lot of time to just talk about things. (Informant 1)

Furthermore, inside the agencies social workers are able to find a space to relax and talk with their colleagues about their concerns:

If I knock on the door and say: "Hey, can I ask you something?" They are you know: "Yes of course". No one push me out or doesn't have time. I know everyone has a busy time, but everyone takes time to new people I feel. So that is a good experience. (Informant 4)

Working in pairs also helps the social workers to support each other while having their cases. Participants expressed the importance to share information and advice each other when is necessary:

In the investigation team we are always two in the same case, so you always have one more social worker that is going to help you. We are together in meetings, we can help each other with the administrative work if is necessary. And we can do everything like discuss the case together. That is a very good support that you are always two. (Informant 3 from group interview)

Hasenfeld (2010) points out the importance of peer support. Sharing their concerns and moral personal beliefs; social workers cultivate moral work within their organizations. In a study, Rajan-Rankin (2013), discusses the importance of social support within social work students. By using informal support from their peers, the students were able to cope with stress and gave them a sense of relief. Same outcomes arise from professional social workers. In their study, Frost, Höjer, and Campanini (2015), expressed that informal support is one of the resources that social workers develop to achieve resilience. Additionally, while encountering difficult situations, peers are able to support each other by talking about their perception and learning from each other by using informal discussions (Berg and Kelly, 2000). On the other hand, Lipsky (2010) mentioned how the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS) helped inexperienced social workers by providing a same case to a pair colleague. By using this approach the new professionals were able to confront difficult cases by consulting each other. As examples of coping resources used as an problem-focused approach (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984); social worker are able to reduce psychological distress while

facing their challenges; thus, they are able to adjust and become resilient (Collins, 2008; Taylor and Stanton, 2007).

Supervisor or managers also provide informal support. Supervision differs from country to country. In Sweden, a study conducted by Bradley and Höjer (2009) concluded that “social workers should be supervised by social workers” (p. 75). Therefore, a supervisor is considered as a professional social worker trained with supervision theory and had previous experience in the field. It is their job to promote supportive supervision (personal and professional) in both informal and formal situations. Furthermore, while the social workers are facing personal issues they need to feel appreciated and valued (Berg and Kelly, 2000). In one interview, a participant mentioned how the supervisors supported her when she was ill:

I felt that they were very supportive. I mean we had a lot of clients and they gave me less clients. So they are really, you know, concern. [...] And she said, since I was very stressful: “do you want to talk to someone?” And she gave a time, I think it was three times and I think it was once a week or once every other week about free meeting with a therapist. (Informant 3)

According to Welbourne (2012), informal discussion is a characteristic of emotional support. Also, it reduces hierarchical differences between the supervisor and the social worker (Berg and Kelly, 2000). While social workers are facing tough situations, supervisors are responsible to strengthen the bonds between them and their staff; which leads to find solutions (Tham and Meagher, 2009) and building the social worker “stability, predictability and reliability” (Welbourne, 2012, p. 231). As an example of emotional work inside the agencies, supervisors and social workers are able to share emotions to develop self-awareness and self-control (Hasenfeld, 2010). This type of support encourage the social worker to recover by developing positive emotions which affect positively their healing process (Saleebey, 1996) and creates an organizational context base on trustworthiness (Welbourne, 2012). Although informal support is one example of an excellent organizational climate, formal support provides more methods to develop job satisfaction.

#### **4.3.2.2 Formal Support**

Collins (2008) uses the concept of formal support as a process of supervision, administration and evaluation system. Inside Child Welfare Agencies, the organizational climate (Schneider et al., 2013) is characterized as an environment of support, training and teamwork; therefore both social workers and managers/supervisors are essential resources of maintaining high standards within the organizations (Berg and Kelly, 2000; Lipsky, 2010). By exercising different strategies of formal support; social workers cultivate problem-focused approach by applying different solutions to a problem (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

##### **4.3.2.2.1 Case Consultation and Supervision**

This research concluded that formal support is divided into three categories: case consultation, supervision and external supervision. According to Berg and Kelly (2000), in theory, the first category is composed by a direct supervisor and a team of six to eight social workers. Nevertheless, in practice it might vary. In general, these meetings focuses on sharing cases and providing solutions as a team to help children in needs (Berg and Kelly, 2000). Moreover, is an environment of mutual learning and challenges to help the workers to develop new strategies of intervention; hence, applying problem-

focused approach (Berg and Kelly, 2000; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Participants mention the importance of these meetings to get support. By using examples of prioritization, the team is able to find solutions to their cases:

I had been participating in one team and what they do is to use the pen and draw on a whiteboard. So you have this situation and they help you. I don't know it can be abusive parents, drug addicts; it can be some many things so you don't know what to focus on. We had a case like that and it was everything involved and she was like: "Ok, what to focus on first?" So they help you to structure it up. Which is very helpful and with colleagues you help each other. (Informant 2 from group interview)

Additionally, social workers also expressed the importance of the role of their supervisor:

Our team is four investigators from 0-12 years and we have one investigator; she is call like first or supervisor. The First. She doesn't have any clients but she helps us with all the clients. If we have questions, difficult questions or we are facing problems; or how should we think about that, what do you think? So we can get good answers. And if there are big problems or I feel I that don't know how, she can help us to be with the meetings with the parents or help us contacts outside this organization if we need answer from somebody else. (Informant 2)

Case consultation is an example of supervision, support and professional commitment (Lee et al., 2011). In his book, Hasenfeld (2010) uses the concept of technology as an example of developing support inside the agencies. On the organization and worker level; technology is used to monitoring and quality. By using the whiteboard, both social workers and supervisor are able to use these items of technology as form of developing answer to their problems. Berg and Kelly (2000) defined this process as "on-going teaching and staff development tool" (p. 214) because it follows a format of outline to encourage camaraderie, comfort and friendship.

In Sweden, supervision is defined as an activity where managers in the field provides different kind of support and training to their staff (Bradley et al., 2010). As mentioned on the first part of this segment, supervisors are social workers that promote management, education and support to their staff (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Therefore, case consultation is considered as an example of supervision. Supervisors are responsible to care and nurture their workers by producing an organizational climate characterized by the use of different resources (humour, laughs) to develop opportunities and skills for the social workers and maintain job satisfaction (Berg and Kelly, 2000; Lee et al., 2011). As leaders, it is their responsibility to establish the meetings rules; however, they empower the social workers to make decisions and cooperate with each other by always being respectful and avoiding criticism (Berg and Kelly, 2000). Furthermore, as positive learning environment, the staff is able to develop their own personal resources (positive beliefs, social skills and problems solving) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) into taking responsibility and promoting professional development (Welbourne, 2012).

Personal meeting with the manager are also example of supervision. According to the participants having a personal time with their supervisor can help them to develop answer to their concerns:

Is also like a backup because sometimes I can face a problem and I think: "Oh! I should do this!" But sometimes you get a little bit uncertain which is like: "Hmm! Really, should I decide that?" And then I go to my team leader and say: "I was thinking about this, is this a good idea?" And she is like: "Yeah! That is good!" And then you feel more secured about it and you can do it. Or

maybe she says: “Hmm! But have you think maybe, what about this?” And maybe you change your mind and do something else. So is really good. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Furthermore, supervisors have the responsibility to assist with various administrative tasks, including reading reports and signing information.

They read everything we write so they can see if we have done things rights and follow the laws rights and stuff like that. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Training their staff is also part of their job. A participant mentioned her experience when she entered her job:

She supports me by introducing me when I was new. I am new, but when I was very much new. We book meetings just her and me. We talk about the organization; we talked about my role, my cases. (Informant 4)

Bradley and Höjer (2009) describe how supervision works in the Swedish Model, by citing Bernler and Johnsson (1985). According to some of their criteria, supervision is characterize by continuity process, global (integrating all the aspect of their work), helping the social worker to reflect their job and as mandatory process (2009, p. 75). By sharing information with their supervisor, the social workers are able to overcome their concerns. Berg and Kelly (2000) describe that asking questions about the cases, using tentative language to avoid accusation and taking the worker perspective, develop worker competence and self-determination. Concurrently, supervisor have the responsibility of administrative support (management and accountability) (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Lipsky (2010) enforces this concept by explaining that managers have the responsibility to follow the agencies objectives. By using guidelines, it is their job to monitor the social worker performance and development (Hasenfeld, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). Furthermore, they use these guidelines on training programs to help the social workers to learn about the organizations. Welbourne (2012) describes that by providing training sessions to the new staff about a particular topic is a form of supervision that reinforces job satisfaction.

Previous studies confirmed these areas as example of supportive systems. Tham and Meagher (2008) discussed that social workers have a positive relationship with their supervisor because the managers give priority to establish good relationship with their staff. Other studies established that supervision are examples of protecting factor to develop resilience (Adamson, Beddoe, and Davys, 2014; Frost et al., 2015). Nevertheless, in general terms, supervision is a key instrument to develop emotional work into the organizations where social workers feel that they are valuable members of the agency (Hasenfeld, 2010; Lipsky, 2010).

#### **4.3.2.2 External Supervision**

Compared to many countries, Sweden provides a third form of support within welfare organizations known as external supervision. Characterized as a psychotherapy model, the supervisor is an external professional contracted by the organization to promote emotional support (Bradley et al., 2010). These supervisors are often choose by the social workers themselves (Bradley and Höjer, 2009).

We have to find one and interview them and see if they fix up. So is up to us to decide whom we want to have. Is not our boss that decides. Is the group that interview the person and decides: “Yes we want him or her” or “No, we don’t”. (Informant 1 from group interview)

This type of supervision is characterized as a group activity outside the organization, where social workers go to a private firm to discuss their emotions (Bradley et al., 2010; Bradley and Höjer, 2009).

I don't know she is *handedare* (supervisor). We have every second or third week we go to her in the city. And we are six people, five colleagues and I. And she is educated to support us. So we can talk about our feelings or a client who makes us angry, sad or something. We can talk about our feelings. And I think she is a social worker or psychologist. I am not sure. She has education to *handeda* (supervise) social workers. (Informant 5)

Furthermore, according to previous research external supervisor could be either social worker or a psychologist (Bradley et al., 2010). According to the participants, their external supervisors are usually therapists that help them with their emotions:

We have like another kind of supervision once a month. That is with a therapist and then we talk about what happens with me when I see this family doing this and when I see that this child has some difficulties. How do I deal with that, how do I try not to take that with me home. You know, things like that. More personal, on a personal level. (Informant 5)

The external supervisor also help the social workers to discuss problems in their organizational context because they can release their tensions from professional pressure (Bradley and Höjer, 2009; Frost et al., 2015). According to one participant, it is an environment where they can discuss their negative emotions about their work:

The point is for us to process our feelings. What we feel in different.... we can feel in different cases, we can feel how the work situation is. Sometimes we can have a problem with a colleague, how should I deal with that? Problem with an external colleague like you work with different municipalities. So that is the point with that, that you can get help with how to think, how to go on. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Additionally, external supervision provides educational support (Bradley et al., 2010). According to one participant, the external supervisor can guide them in how to work with their clients:

But that is what I thought about external supervision. When you are able to talk to somebody. Because we had an example of a mom that was like a child and he was explaining about different stages in what you get as a child or growing up and he was like: "Ok, she has problem with this and this. How old is she like really mentally? Like three? Ok, how do you meet a three-year-old person? Ok, you get down on their level, you try to find the structure, and you distract them." (Informant 2 from group interview)

Used as a coping strategy, external supervision provides an environment of social support (emotional and informational) and material resources (services) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). According to different studies, the demand of external supervision has increase in Sweden over the years (Bradley et al., 2010). As a important key of resilience, external supervision creates an environment of informal discussion, positive learning and training that reduces stress related disorders by providing supporting functions (Welbourne, 2012). Therefore, social workers are able increase their knowledge about their field and express their concerns without being criticised (Bradley and Höjer, 2009; Frost et al., 2015). As a private service, agencies paid a lot of money for the services (Bradley et al., 2010); sometimes creating conflict between the managers (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Nevertheless, social workers feel that external supervision helps them to develop good relationship with their clients; therefore, they don't want their manager to intervene with their external support (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). A previous research explained that obtaining the client trust is a key to work

successfully with children and families (Perlinski et al., 2013). Hence, by hiring external supervision, social workers learn how to create an environment based on moral work (cooperation) with their clients to develop trust (Hasenfeld, 2010).

Child Welfare agencies provide different type of support systems; nevertheless, with many bureaucracy challenges, these mechanisms seem to be under development. Therefore, it cultivates boundaries between the social worker and the organization.

#### 4.3.2.2.3 Limitations of Formal Support

During the interviews it was possible to learn how different Child Welfare Agencies perform an environment based on moral work where social workers are able to develop coping strategies. Nonetheless, the gathered information expressed that these organizations differ from each other in many different ways. The implemented support systems varied according the location of the agency. From this perspective, the participants expressed mixing feelings about the supportive environment they enrol.

Supervisors are perceived as the main trunk of the Child Welfare Agencies' tree. As supportive resource, they provide assistance with training, education and information to help the social workers to face uncertainty, moral dilemmas and complex relations (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). However, in recent years, Child Welfare Agencies had gone through many organizational changes provoking job dissatisfaction. According to Pia Tham (2007), there has been a high level of turnovers inside Child Welfare organizations. Social workers develop stress related disorder because the agencies lack decent management practice and the relationship with the supervisor is limit. On a particular occasion a participant expressed that getting time to talk with the supervisor is difficult:

The problem is not the time when I talk to them. The problem is to get the time. I think is very important to me to feel like I got the backup and sometimes I think is a personal thing of me that I get really insecure when I am put into new situations, so I really need the feedback. If I don't get the feedback I get very insecure: "Did I do the right thing here?" Because I really don't want to do anything wrong. But I think I am really control freak and that way. Maybe is a personal thing. But for me is important to meet every week. But for now, for example, my supervisor is on holidays for two weeks. So we have two supervisors: one for the other group and one for us. So if have some emergency I can go to the other one; but I don't have the schedule time. And since I am basically new I still feel that there is a lot of questions that I don't know where I get the time to clarify. But she helped me today also with, I just had one thing that I wrote down and she need to put her signature. So she says: "Oh! That is ok". So she is there for me that way but you know the part of: "Oh! I just have a question about this?" I don't know where we get the time to ask.  
(Informant 3)

According to literature, inside Sweden, social workers in Child Welfare agencies are suffering health difficulties because of work pressure (Bradley et al., 2010). While trying to obtain their client trust (Perlinski et al., 2013), they lack relevant experience (Perlinski, 2010), therefore, the supervisor plays the main role to nurture the workers to feel valued (Berg and Kelly, 2000). In their study, Healy, Meagher and Cullin (2004) expressed that professional feel treasured when supervision is accessible when they need it and it creates an environment of professional development. Berg and Kelly (2000) also encourage the importance of conversation between supervisor and staff as a learning process. However, unfortunately, empirical research demonstrate that in Sweden, social workers are unhappy with the quality of their supervision which is an important reason for turnover (Tham, 2007); therefore, there has been a decrease of

confidence in social work practice (Cocozza and Hort, 2011).

Case Consultation is a valuable resource of staff development and support when uncertainty arise (Berg and Kelly, 2000). However, when it is not well organized, it generates problems for the staff. According to one participant, her meetings with the group to consult a case tends to be very difficult because:

Everyone talks at the same time (Informant 4)

Other limitation about case consultation is that it only focus in one specific case only and other social workers cannot discuss their own circumstances:

Right now in the group it happens a lot in one of my colleague case. So a lot of time in the meetings is about her case. So maybe there is no time for my case. So there is you know, lack of priority in my case as well. (Informant 4)

This tend to create some problems for the worker since they feel that they can't always provide support since they are thinking about their own cases:

Sometimes we are a lot of people and one person has a very big case and you are going to write it on the board and everything. I get bored. Because is like: "Oh! It is not my case!" I am not having the... How do you say? My brain is not possible taking all the information because I am focusing at my cases. (Informant 5)

Case consultation should provide a supportive environment characterized as a space of professional development. Nevertheless, with the increasing of different obstacles from the organization (Perlinski, 2010); social pressure, lacking good management practice and organizational and professional commitment (Tham, 2007); emotional strain and insufficient support from colleagues and supervisors (Tham and Meagher, 2009); is no wonder why the meetings are disorganise and people tend to get bored.

The implementation of external supervision had developed positive outcomes as examples emotional work. Social workers are able to develop new creative skills to address the services users (Bradley et al., 2010; Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Furthermore, it has increased over the last years, making it an important resource of education and support (Bradley et al., 2010). Nevertheless, this study has confirmed that the implementation of external supervision varies according to the agencies. According to one participant, she confuses external supervision with external assessor:

We have our paperwork that we do were we have four months to finish it. Sometimes it goes over four months [---]. But I you go above those four months then there is an external supervisor that goes through everything and gets also like the warning. (Informant 3)

With this confirmation it seems that not all the agencies provides this services to their social workers. Previous studies mentioned that the majority of social worker in Child Welfare setting received external supervision (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Furthermore, the number exceed 90% (Bradley et al., 2010). Yet, there are some social workers that don not benefit from the service.

Additional challenges emerge at the time of providing external supervision. This study has confirmed that the implementation of the services varies according to the organization policy. Some agencies provide the services to their social worker twice a month, while others only once. This has created some limitations to the social workers because they feel that they don't have enough time to discuss with the external



supervisor:

Once a month you sit in a group with five people together in two hours. Sometimes I think is too little. Because we are a group of people that are having two hours once a month. Maybe we should be a small group or have more time. (Informant 1 from group interview)

Furthermore, they also feel that not everybody has the opportunity to express himself or herself:

I felt that we need a little bit of more time because if you get stuck in some situation it is their job to handle and this is not going to happen. But sometimes you need to discuss. And one person is sitting with something and can't talk about that. (Informant 2 from group interview)

According to Wiklund (2007), municipalities have a broad discretion in how they organize and administrate their work. As consequence, organisational diversity among Welfare Agencies has increased (Bergmark and Lundström, 2007). Influenced by environmental factors (Wiklund, 2007) and with the implementation of the New Public Management concerns about production and value of money arise (Bradley and Höjer, 2009). Therefore, child welfare agencies are worried about the cost of this service and some agencies try to find cheaper alternatives for the services (Bradley et al., 2010; Bradley and Höjer, 2009). This limits the professional development of the social workers.

Child Welfare agencies undergo different evaluations process to develop job satisfaction among the workers. Nevertheless, literature has explained that level of professionalism of social work practice has been under criticism in recent years (Cocozza and Hort, 2011). Therefore, if proper assessments are not used to create new legislations, the future of Child Welfare Agencies would be unclear.

## **Chapter 7: Discussions and Conclusions**

This last chapter will focus on a general discussion about the results of the previous chapter by providing critical comments about the outcomes. This will be followed by a general conclusion about the research and some suggestions for the future of social work practice.

### **7.1 Discussion**

This research has reviewed the main challenges and supportive systems that Child Welfare Organizations provide to their staff in Gothenburg and surrounding municipalities. It seems that even though Child Welfare Agencies provide different support systems to their workers, there are still a lot of problems to maintain job satisfaction.

The transition from their university to the work place is the first challenge that social workers experience. According to the results, universities provide general bachelor degree by integrating different social sciences subjects to their field. Therefore, its main concentration is characterized by developing theories and explaining laws systems. Moreover, students develop general knowledge in different areas of social work practice, since it is considered as a multidisciplinary career. Field placement is only limited to one organization with the period of time of twenty weeks. In this sense, students are not able to achieve adequate practical knowledge about social work practice in different fields. Furthermore, this research discussed the problem concerning the gap between theories and practice. As NQSW's with fresh theoretical knowledge, they aren't able to discuss new approaches with their colleagues because they don't talk about theories. These circumstances are not only limited to the Swedish context. Frost, Campanini and Höjer (2012) conducted a comparative study about student perspectives of social work practice in Sweden, England and Italy. According to their results, students confirmed that in general they lack experiences in their field placement. Yet, it seems that Italy and England provided more options of practical knowledge compared to Sweden. Therefore, with limited practical experiences, these workers face new challenges on their selected field, which develop more problems to the child welfare agency and the social worker. This limitation has been debated in terms of how it affects the level of professionalism in social work practice. There have been many different research articles that conclude with the same results (Cocozza and Hort, 2011; Tham, 2007); which makes this author wonder why there hasn't been any changes in the education system of social work to develop more qualified workers? Is it true what Sandstrom (2007) concluded that Swedish Conventions lack of policies that defends practice in different professional degree making it possible to conduct university programs without any type of practice? If not? Why have these policies not been implemented in professional organizations to conduct practice in university programs? What is the main cause of limiting field placement to only one institution, since social work practice is very broad? These new questions emerged from research, and it is quite strange that even after several years there hasn't been any change in social work education to endorse higher levels of social work professionalization.

Being a social worker in a Child Welfare Agency is challenging. This thesis concludes that the social workers are victims of administration. Apart from their job as investigators and *Barnsekreterare*, the workers are responsible to document all the information in a database. So they are considered to be secretaries as well. Compared to liberal welfare model countries, such as USA, Canada, UK and Australia, (Esping-Andersen, 1990), where everything must be followed by guidelines, in Sweden municipalities develop their own model of how to organize and administer their work. Nonetheless, it seems that the Implementation of the New Public Management provides an increase of administration and bureaucracy inside Sweden's welfare agencies, making them comparable with liberal's countries guidelines. On the other hand, being new in the agency is very difficult, especially when there aren't very good training systems. In different occasions, it was mentioned that child welfare agencies lack good introductory programs. By providing cases on their first day, social workers are victims of stress situations. Furthermore, with lack of experience and not knowing their colleagues very well; social workers are forced to find the answers to their problems on their own. This creates many concerns about their job expectative and without feedbacks they feel that their actions might not be the correct answer to their clients case.

Child Welfare Agencies experienced many administrative changes that create problems for both the social workers and the clients. Clients are the most affected. According to the results, administrative process affects the type of services the agencies deliver. The organizations provide different type of assistances to their clients; nevertheless, with different organizational changes, the departments' responsibilities are unclear making more difficult to find answers in how to address the clients' cases. Therefore, as a participant mentioned, everything "*falls between the chairs*" (Informant 2). Clients get very upset about these poor services. In many occasions, the results confirmed that social workers feel concerned about their work with their clients. Since clients have different backgrounds, it is impossible to address every family the same way. Furthermore, making a life changing decision about a child generates a lot of stress. Some clients are very difficult to handle, and social workers are responsible to support them in different ways. Nevertheless, without their cooperation it makes their job more difficult. On the other hand, having a short time to investigate while using it on writing process, clients have limit access to support. Therefore, they can only visit the agencies in working hours from Monday to Friday. However, compared to a previous study about social workers been victims of clients threats and violence (Tham, 2007), in this research, none of the participants expressed that they felt victims of their clients behaviour. It seems that clients are willing to cooperate with the professionals, even though they are facing difficult situations. This conclusion is equivalent to Coccozza and Hort's (2011) study explaining that both the parents and the professional work in partnership as an example of the family oriented system. Therefore, the challenge here is not addressing the clients; it is the administration that limits the services to the families. Therefore, what will be the consequences of these actions? If services are only limited and social workers are facing a lot of paperwork to address their clients needs, who is going to be responsible when a tragedy occur? The social worker or the agency?

Different news about poor social works practice has been developed on the media in different countries. In their study Tham and Meagher (2009) describe that there has been negatively publicity about Child Welfare Agencies in Sweden; although it has not been as hardly criticised compared to UK. Nevertheless, this thesis's results confirmed that the media provides criticism about the poor conditions of social work practice

inside the Child Welfare Agencies. This research concludes that it is very challenging to work in this field. With all the previous concerns, social workers are still adapting to the Child Welfare agencies. It feels that is a constant learning process since institutions are going through constant organizational changes. Therefore, the level of social work practice in these agencies are in critical evaluation.

Although social workers face many difficult situations in the agencies, they have access to a variety of resources within themselves and the community to provide coping strategies and face new challenges at work. As individuals, they have personal characteristics that help them to be resilient. According to the results, these social workers have a strong personality to work in this type of environment. Characterized by their sense of humour, motivation and organization, the social workers are capable to address their problems and find solutions. Furthermore, distraction helps the professionals to take their mind out of the problems. As a coping strategy, results confirm that the social workers like to do different activities (exercise, watch TV, laziness) not related to their work. Accompanied with environmental resources (friends, families, stable relationship) this strategy reduces stress at minimum and is characterized as a supporting system. Therefore, by sharing their feelings with the environment, social workers develop coping strategies to address their challenges from another perspective.

A recent study discussed that inside Child Welfare Agencies in Sweden, there has been high levels of turnovers within its staff (Tham, 2007). Welfare Agencies had provided different type of organizational support systems; nevertheless, staffs are still quitting. This thesis concludes that some of these agencies had developed new programs to maintain job satisfaction while others not. According to the results, some agencies had developed new changes in their systems to promote support. By offering longer introduction programs, reducing workloads and providing a mentor, the social workers learn about the policies and the structure of the organizations. Other agencies develop continuum education practices by offering administrative and external learning programs to the entire staff. As a result, it increases job satisfaction.

Nevertheless, even though supportive system varies from agencies, it was confirmed that the entire respondents like their job because it is fun. The participants mentioned that there is always something new to do everyday. Furthermore, having fun is as example of informal support. Just be able to laugh and joke around in their free time social workers support each other and develop new solutions to address their challenges. Informal support is not only limited in the organization. According to the participants, by just talking in the car with their colleagues they can exchange their concerns and support each other. On the other hand, informal support is also addressed inside the agencies. Social workers are able to knock on their colleague's door and ask questions about their worries; even though their colleagues are having a busy schedule, it is possible to find a moment just to talk. Working with peers is also an example of informal support. According to the results, in some agencies, the social workers work in pairs. Just by sharing information, doing administration and addressing the same clients; professionals develop new learning techniques to address their challenges; therefore, it reduces the level of stress. Direct supervisors also play an important role in informal support. According to data, when the social workers are facing personal issues, they can contact their superior and receive emotional support. Therefore, the supervisor responds by offering other type of external support (therapy) and reducing the social worker's

workload. As an example of good organizational climate, informal support establishes professional performance inside the agencies and contributes to worker retention.

Formal support is developed inside the agencies as a process of supervision, administration and evaluation (Collins, 2008). According to the participants, formal support is represented in three categories: case consultation, supervision and external supervision. Case consultation was described as a process where the supervisor and the team meet to discuss a difficult case and provide solutions based prioritization of the problems. Therefore, by using the whiteboard they described the situation to develop hierarchical solutions. Furthermore, as an example of supervision, case consultation is used as a teaching technique and supporting system.

Supervision is also addressed with personal meetings between the social worker and the manager. According to the results, social workers meet their supervisor once a week to discuss only their cases. In this sense, they are responsible to provide tools to help the workers to address their concerns. At the same time, it is their duty to assist on administrative tasks by reading and signing the workers' reports. According to the participants, supervisors are also involved to train their new staff. One example is by providing information about how the organization works and having personal meeting with the new employee. This study confirms that supervision is one of the most important keys of maintaining job satisfaction. By receiving support from their superiors, the social workers feel that they are valuable members of the agencies.

Sweden has introduced external supervision as an example of formal support to promote job satisfaction. It seems that it has created many positive outcomes. This study confirms that social workers are very happy to receive this type of support because it is a space where they can express themselves without being criticised. In this sense, the agencies empower the social worker to decide who is going to be their external supervisor. Usually conducted by a therapist, this activity takes place outside the agencies where a team of social workers and the external supervisor discuss about feelings, organizational problems and educational training. In this regard, external supervision is considered as a coping strategy to develop resilient social workers.

In general terms, the supportive systems provided by the child welfare agencies seem to have positive impact on their staff. Nevertheless, in different occasions, the participants express that these type of support has limitations. For many of the professional, having a personal space with their supervisor is an important resource of support; nevertheless, it is very difficult to find time to talk to them because of their busy schedule. This produces many concerns for the social worker because they feel that they need a feedback to verify if they are doing their job right. On the other hand, case consultation has also some limitations. According to the results, consulting a case tends to be difficult when the meetings are unstructured following a guideline. People tend to talk at the same time and the supervisor doesn't control the group. Additionally, it only focuses in one particular case. One participant expressed that is good to have these meetings to help a colleague and learn from their experiences. Nevertheless, they are still concerned about their own cases and feel that these meetings tend to be boring. Furthermore, one case might extend to several weeks, and the social workers feel that there is not fair because they also need support for their own cases. Therefore, it tends to be challenging for the workers to help their colleagues in these meetings. External supervision has also been criticised. Since agencies differ from each other, not all are capable to receive this type of support. In one of the interviews, a participant expressed

that external supervision is related as a warning, because the social workers didn't finish their job at the time they should have. In other cases, the results confirmed that external supervision takes place once a month in certain agencies, while in others it goes twice a month. Some of the participants expressed that having this support once a month is not sufficient because they don't have enough time to discuss their concerns. Furthermore, not everyone has the opportunity to express himself or herself.

This entire previous discussion makes this author to wonder about the future of these organizations. Since Child Welfare Agencies had been negatively criticised by the media, it seems that not many social workers will like to apply to this stressful job. Furthermore, social workers are motivated to help children to have a better future; however, if you spend more time writing than actually doing social work practice, this job becomes more boring and professionals tend to lose their motivation; therefore they decide to find more interesting jobs in other areas. In consequence, what is going to happen to the Child Welfare Agencies when there aren't more job applications? What are going to happen to the families who benefit from these services when there aren't more resources? If there aren't new legislations to develop better services, it can be seen that Swedish Child Welfare would not continue to be an excellent model to follow.

## 7.2 Conclusions

This qualitative research reviewed the main challenges, coping strategies and support systems NQSW's and qualified social workers that are new in Child Welfare agencies face in the organization. According to the results, these social workers face different challenges from the moment they entered the agencies. Universities provide only general education in their studies. The social workers enter this field without enough practice in the area. Apart from their professional practice, social workers are facing too much administrative work, which creates negative consequences for them, the organization and the clients. Nevertheless, these professionals develop coping strategies with the help of their resources (personal and social support) in order to face new challenges within their work environment. The Child Welfare Agencies also develop supportive strategies to enhance job satisfaction in formal and informal settings. By using mechanism of supervision, case consultation and external supervision, social workers acquire new techniques to address their challenges and endorse professional resilience. Nevertheless, the results concluded that the agencies do not follow a guideline to implement these strategies. Therefore, they differ from one to another, which creates imbalance in their support systems.

In international basis, Sweden seems to be a role model to follow because of its welfare services. During the course of the master, it was possible to learn about the strength of the Welfare System. Characterized with high levels of decommodification (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the state is responsible for its citizens well-being, making them one of the best places to live. However, Swedish welfare systems have been affected by the New Public Management. In many occasions, different professors mentioned that the level of social work professionalism has been under criticism since Welfare Agencies are more focused on production. This affects citizens in general. Different news about poor services in Child Welfare Agencies have been criticised over the media (Tham, 2007). Furthermore, social workers have been victimised because of their mediocrity while working with families. Therefore, this criticism helped the researcher to ask herself: Why Sweden has been criticised about poor services? What are the causes for

the social workers to develop poor services inside Child Welfare Agencies? What are the Child Welfare Agencies doing to help their Social Workers? Poor services are consequences about poor organizational climate. Nevertheless, agencies have gone through several modifications to increase their performance. In this case, initially, the objective of the thesis was to focus on positive outcomes to develop resilience among social workers. Nonetheless, results confirmed that each agency develops their own rules and not all the social workers have access to all the supporting services. Therefore, it seems that even though social worker experience support, there are still high levels of turnover, which creates a problems for the organization, the staff and the clients.

This situation is very complex and this thesis was only limited to a five month space to deliver, which creates a limitation to acquire further knowledge about the area. Also, just by interviewing a few social workers and not other professionals (supervisor, external supervisor) it is not enough to conclude that in general Child Welfare Agencies in Gothenburg and surrounding municipalities lack of support systems. Furthermore, it is a complexity to learn everything since there is language barrier and the most important results are only in Swedish. Nevertheless, even though it provides limited information about the context it could be use to develop awareness.

It would have been interesting to explore more about the context, however time was very limited. This thesis provided a lot of information, however new question arose from the results which can be address for future research:

- Why social work degree in Sweden lacks of practical knowledge when it is a very demanded career for the welfare?
- Why the level of social work professionalization has been decreasing in the Swedish context?
- What will be the future of Child Welfare Organization in Sweden?
  - What is going to happen if there aren't more applicants for the job?
  - What will happen to the families who need these services?
  - What kinds of strategies politicians are using to develop better services inside the agencies?

This thesis is written for research purpose only. However, students and professionals from the university would have access to it and would be able to learn about the main concerns these professionals are facing. Starting with the education of social work, this dissertation is not criticising about the bachelor curriculum. However it seems that future students can benefit if universities provides more practical knowledge. On the other hand, many of the staff in the university had worked in Child Welfare Organizations before and they are aware of the current situation. As social workers, they have rights to create awareness to general public about the challenges social workers are facing in welfare organization. By using different articles, dissertations and books, general public would be aware of their situation. Therefore, it creates pressure to local and general leaders to create new legislation to endorse job satisfaction and providing better services to the citizens.

In conclusion, the objective of this thesis is to create awareness about the specific social problem that has been developing in Child Welfare agencies' staff. It seems that it has been a continuous problem in the Swedish society. Nevertheless, as long as leaders are conscious about the challenges, they would develop better strategies to reduce the



problems. Therefore, the future of Child Welfare Agencies would be bright by providing better services to children and families in need.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Informed Consent



### UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

The following is a presentation of how we will use the data collected in the interview.

The research project is a part of our education in the International Masters program in Social Work at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. In order to insure that our project meets the ethical requirements for good research we promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether he or she will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for us to document what is said during the interview and also helps us in the continuing work with the project. In our analysis some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project the data will be destroyed. The data we collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions, or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact us or our supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Isabel Alvarez (student)

Staffan Höjer (supervisor)

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Interviewee



## Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview guide

# Interview Questions or group interview Questions

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Thank you very much for participating in the interview / group interview. As you may know, in recent years, in Sweden there have been many changes into the Child Welfare agency practice. Many authors agree that there have been several difficulties for the social worker in this area. Situations of lack of experience, stress related disorders, inadequate management practice are the cause of discontent among social worker. Therefore, within this interview / group interview, I will like for you to discuss:

1. Explain about your job. What do you do?
  - a. How long have you been working with children and families?
  - b. When did you graduate from the university?
  - c. Do you think the university provided you enough training to enter this type of job?
2. Tell me your experience as a beginner in your work?
  - a. What are the main challenges you are facing in your job?
  - b. Were you prepared to work with these challenges?
  - c. What about your good experiences?

Facing these challenges creates coping strategies:

3. How do you deal with these challenges? Personal qualities, talents, spirituality, be able to interact with others
  - a. Are there personal traits?
  - b. Can you cope with as group?
  - c. Does the people around you help you to cope? Ex. Peers, friends, etc.

The organization influence

4. I will like to know how your organization supports you during these hard times?
  - a. Does your supervisors provide you any type of support and how?
  - b. In Sweden, external supervision has provided an excellent tool for coping strategies. How do you feel about external supervision?

Ending questions:

5. Which question was the most difficult? How come?
6. Do you think is there something else I should ask?