Sustaining a plurality of imperatives: An institutional analysis of knowledge perspectives in Swedish social service policies

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Abstract: Existing social service policy fields and social work practice are characterized by a plurality of knowledge perspectives. At the same time, social services are among the public policy areas criticized for lacking a reliable knowledge base to support professional as well as political ambitions and actions. This article contributes to the literature on knowledge perspectives in social service policies by studying and analyzing mechanisms that sustain a plurality of perspectives in the policies. The empirical material consists of knowledge perspectives in social service policies at the national level for child and family care and substance abuse treatment in Sweden between 1992 and 2015. Mechanisms that sustain a plurality of perspectives are identified with the support of an institutional logics framework. The main findings are that a plurality of knowledge perspectives, such as professional, scientific, and organizational, seems to be a permanent rather than temporary configuration; and that this permanent plurality is sustained by a set of mechanisms, including assimilation, blending, segregation, and contradiction. Despite this pluralism, there are only a few explicit comments or guidelines in the policies regarding how the relationship between different knowledge perspectives should be managed. The findings suggest that more attention should be paid to the relationship between different knowledge perspectives and its impact on social work practice.

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Introduction

Existing policy fields and policies in social services are characterized by a plurality of knowledge perspective, including professional, client, and scientific perspectives (Drury-Hudson, 1999; Pawson et al., 2003; Trevithick, 2008). This diversity of perspectives has been the subject of academic analysis and debate, including both more extensive and more narrowly focused perspectives (Drisko & Grady, 2015; Mullen & Streiner, 2004; Thyer & Pignotti, 2011). At the same time, social services are one among many public policy fields being criticized for lacking a reliable, cohesive knowledge base to support professional as well as political ambitions and actions (Davies et al., 2000).

Most researchers have focused their attention on one knowledge perspective at a time, while only a limited amount of research has been conducted from a more comprehensive perspective, such as exploring the plurality of perspectives in itself, along with its impact on the field (Holmes et al., 2006). The intention of this article is not to address the question if the existing plurality is relevant, desirable or not, but to investigate and analyze how it is articulated within and across individual social service policies. We argue that more research is needed for example related to the relationships between existing knowledge perspectives, as well as the degree to which a plurality is acknowledged and managed in policies and practice. The aim of the article is to address some of these research needs. Three empirical research questions have guided the study:

1. Which knowledge perspectives can be identified in national social service policies?
2. To what degree is a plurality of knowledge perspectives present and, if so, acknowledged?
3. Why and how should the knowledge perspectives be implemented according to national social service policies?

By answering these questions, the article seeks to contribute to extant literature on knowledge perspectives in social service policies by identifying the presence of what we here denote as *knowledge imperatives*; that is, normative statements claiming an exclusive body of knowledge and containing rationality for individual decision making and action in social services. This is done in a case study of Swedish national policies concerning individual social support. With the support of institutional theory, an institutional framework related to mechanisms of change and coexistence (for example, Thornton et al., 2012), and characteristics of the Swedish welfare state, the article also tries to answer a fourth research question:

4. What enables and how is a plurality of knowledge perspectives maintained over time?

The fourth question is important for researchers interested in how a plurality can be upheld, but also for politicians, policymakers, and social workers interested in how the relationship between different knowledge perspectives could be managed.

Research on knowledge imperatives

Our review of the research literature on knowledge imperatives in individual social services reveals that many different imperatives have been identified and studied (Drury-Hudson, 1999; Pawson et al., 2003; Trevithick, 2008). However, rather than acknowledging this plurality as a starting point and motivation for further research, many researchers tend to focus on either one group of stakeholders' interests or one type of knowledge imperative at a time. For example, studies often focus on professional knowledge (Hudson, 1997; O'Sullivan, 2005), client-based knowledge (Davis & Gray, 2017; Patterson, et al., 2009), or organizational knowledge (Austin, Dal Santo, & Lee, 2012; Skillmark & Denvall, 2018).

Another set of studies approach social services from more theoretical perspectives, indirectly acknowledging potential conflicts related to the co-existence of knowledge imperatives, discussing for example whether social services should be considered an art or a science (Bent-Goodley, 2015; Gitterman & Knight, 2013), a practical-moral or a technical-rational activity (Taylor & White, 2006), or whether instrumental or conceptual knowledge use is preferable (Marsh & Reed, 2015). Despite these theoretical perspectives, many studies have yet to address the reasons behind the lack of cohesion or the mechanisms that enable a plurality of knowledge imperatives.

A related factor is the emergence of evidence-based practice (EBP) as a concept, phenomenon, and knowledge imperative in social services (for example, Gambrill, 2006). Incorporating scientific, professional, and client-based knowledge perspectives, EBP could be regarded as a unifying imperative seeking to address various stakeholder interests. However, EBP has at the same time been criticized for being too mechanistic, ignoring clients' and practitioners' characteristics (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011), and focusing on scientific knowledge at the expense of other sources of knowledge (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Austin et al., 2012; Petersén & Olsson, 2015). Other concepts, such as evidence-informed practice, have been launched that are more open to integrate other sources of knowledge than stricter interpretations of EBP (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011). Discretion has also been highlighted as important for the possibilities of integrating different forms of knowledge in balanced assessment and decision-making, especially in the case of complex assessments such as in social work (Evans & Hupe, 2019; Lipsky, 2010).

A more analytical objection is that EBP often has been treated as a singular unit, drawing attention away from how the three different knowledge imperatives

comprising EBP are related to each other theoretically and practically (Hidecker et al., 2009). Accordingly, it could be argued that EBP increases, rather than decreases, the plurality of knowledge imperatives.

To sum up, we have identified five categories of knowledge imperatives in previous research: professional, organizational, client-based, evidence-based, and scientific. There is also a need for more research related to the relationships between existing imperatives as well as to how a plurality of knowledge imperatives is managed in policies and practice.

Theoretical and analytical framework: Institutional logics

This article approaches knowledge imperatives in social service policies from an institutional perspective in general and an institutional-logics approach in particular. An institutional perspective assumes that fields, such as social services, are embedded in institutional environments, and therefore that historic and contemporary norms, values, and rules influence the formulation and presentation of objects, such as policies, in these fields. The institutional-logics approach focuses on and analyzes the existence, relations, as well as competition between different logics, such as knowledge imperatives, in various institutional objects and environments (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). We believe that the institutional-logics approach is suitable for analyzing knowledge imperatives in national policies in social services given (1) the existence of a plurality of knowledge imperatives in social services and (2) scholarly suggestions that public policies and services could be especially influenced by historic and contemporary norms, values, and rules (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993).

While some policy theories assume that policy formulation is followed by implementation, the institutional perspective makes a distinction between policy reforms and policy implementation (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993). As an outcome of this distinction, research has showed that the relationship between reforms and implementation can take many forms, including a hierarchical, reversed, or de-coupled relationship (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Oliver, 1991; Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Brunsson, 2009). In addition, scholars propose that policies may serve not only as a basis for generating collective action, but also to provide legitimacy and stability, address contradictory demands and interests, and promote images of rationality and authority. Moreover, contrary to the assumption that only one logic could exist in a policy (Greenwood et al., 2010; Reay & Hinings, 2009), institutional scholars focus more on how various logics could co-exist in a policy and sometimes even be incompatible with each other; for example, by having different goals or means to reach them (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Scott, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012).

The institutional-logics approach also takes an interest in processes and mechanisms that may contribute to and uphold a co-existence of various logics (e.g., Thornton et al., 2012). In this article, we will use an analytical framework, developed by Thornton et al. (2012, p. 164), to explore and analyze the plurality of knowledge imperatives in social service policies. The framework consists of a set of mechanisms:

1. Assimilation incorporates different logics into the discourse of either a dominant or a new, overarching logic.
2. Blending enables logics to acknowledge, appreciate, and incorporate norms and values from other logics.
3. Contraction means that a logic has been abandoned.
4. In elaboration, one logic gains dominance over other logics.
5. Expansion diffuses logics from one field to another.
6. Replacement exchanges one logic for another as the dominant logic.
7. Segregation enables logics to co-exist in total autonomy from each other.

The seven mechanisms should be viewed as ideal types, and in real policies, they often occur in combinations (cf. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011).

Concepts, empirical materials, and methods

The empirical material comprises knowledge imperatives in social service policies for child and family care and substance-abuse treatment at the national level in Sweden during the period 1992-2015. The term *policy* is defined as an official document expressing principles and recommendations normally intended for improving a situation or a context. A *knowledge imperative* is operationalized as a statement of values meeting the following two criteria: (1) claiming an exclusive body of knowledge and (2) containing a rationality for individual decision making and action.

Sweden has been witnessing a growing interest in the knowledge base for social services (Sundell et al., 2010). Social services in Sweden also comprise various mutually dependent stakeholders at national, regional, local, and individual levels such as the government, national public agencies, local municipalities with politically elected committees responsible for the social services, and social workers; and with an inconsistency existing in various stakeholders' roles (Blom & Morén, 2019, p. 129-145), allowing for a wide latitude in discretion (Lipsky, 2010; Molander, 2016). Hence, we argue that Sweden provides a particularly productive context for studying a plurality of knowledge imperatives and their relations to each other.

The delimitation to the period 1992-2015 is motivated by the growing interest among policymakers during this period to strengthen the knowledge foundation

for social services (National Board of Health and Welfare [NBHW], 2004; Sundell et al., 2010). Child and family care and substance-abuse treatment were chosen as both have been subjected to considerable debate and research concerning the knowledge base for assessment, decision-making, and interventions (for example, Shaw et al., 2009; Bergmark et al., 2014). The focus on the national level is finally motivated by the fact that the social services in Sweden to a large extent is regulated and financed by national law and public funds.

The empirical material comprises policies from the Swedish government, from three dominant public bodies (the National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Agency for Public Management, and the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services), and from one non-profit organization (the Swedish Association of Local Authorities).

Diagram 1
Flow diagram of policy review process
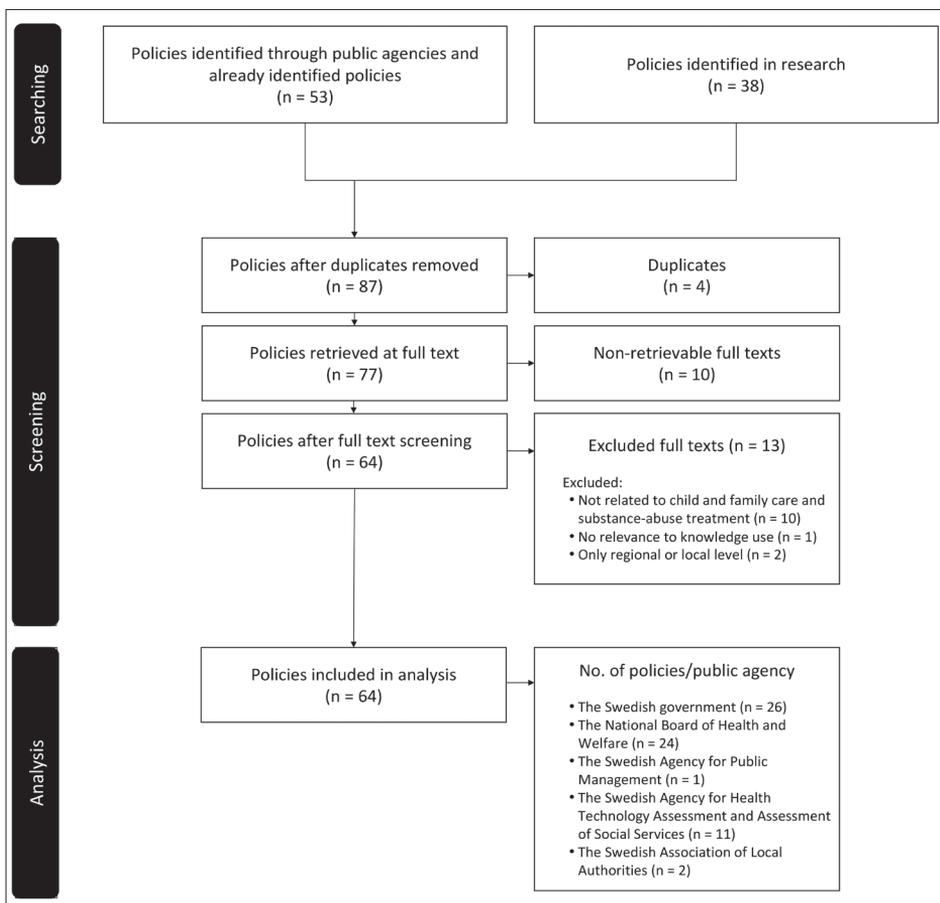
Policies were identified by searching these organizations' official websites, reviewing referenced policies in previous research, and examining references to other policies in already-identified policies (see diagram 1). The number of policies per year is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Number of policies published per year

1992	1
1993	0
1994	0
1995	0
1996	0
1997	2
1998	3
1999	2
2000	3
2001	3
2002	1
2003	3
2004	2
2005	3
2006	3
2007	2
2008	3
2009	2
2010	9
2011	4
2012	8
2013	1
2014	4
2015	5

With a mainly deductive approach, we searched for the following knowledge imperatives in the included policies:

- Professional knowledge: social workers' own knowledge acquired through education or work experiences.
- Scientific knowledge: research studies, methods, and systematic knowledge reviews.
- Organizational knowledge: local follow-up studies and evaluations, standardized assessment tools, and investigation templates.
- Client-based knowledge: documentation from client organizations or councils, local client polls, and individual clients' own experiences.

- Evidence-based knowledge: scientific knowledge as well as professional and client-based knowledge.

In addition to these imperatives, we also searched for other knowledge imperatives that met the criteria of claiming an exclusive body of knowledge and containing a rationality for individual decision making and action. One such imperative was identified, political layman knowledge, here defined as local politicians' knowledge, perceptions and values regarding provision of and individual decision-making in social services.

The main method for coding the empirical material was via content analysis using a directive approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Compared with conventional content analysis, in which coded categories are derived directly from the data, we searched the policies for the knowledge imperatives we had extracted from previous research (professional, scientific, organizational, client-based knowledge and evidence-based practice), or other knowledge imperatives that met the criteria of claiming an exclusive body of knowledge and containing a rationality for individual decision making and action. The coded material was finally analyzed with the support of the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo.

Empirical results

The empirical results are presented in relation to the first three research questions guiding the article.

Occurrence and definitions

The first research question focuses on which knowledge imperatives that can be identified in national social service policies. Related empirical interests are the number of times a particular imperative occurs in the material and how explicitly it is defined and conceptualized.

Six categories of imperatives could be identified: professional, scientific, organizational, client-based, evidence-based practice (EBP), and political layman. The first five categories have been acknowledged in previous research, whereas the last emanated from the empirical material and is related to the politically elected local committees responsible for individual social services, as discussed in the method section. An example of how a political-layman knowledge imperative is expressed in the material is as follows: '[S]ocial services are a politically and not only professionally governed activity. Decisions on measures and actions are, therefore, based also on other than knowledge in terms of science and proven experience' (NBHW, 2000, p. 24).

In terms of occurrences, four of the six categories of knowledge imperatives are found in half or more than half of the studied policies (see Table 2): scientific; organizational; EBP; and client-based. Less frequent and, in some cases, more implicitly referred to were professional and especially political-layman imperatives. Henceforth, to simplify the presentation, the concept *categories of knowledge imperatives* is shortened to just *knowledge imperatives.*

Table 2
Knowledge imperatives in policies

Political-layman	In 8 out of 64 policies
Professional	In 29 out of 64 policies
Organizational	In 32 out of 64 policies
Client-based	In 32 out of 64 policies
Evidence-based practice	In 37 out of 64 policies
Scientific	In 53 out of 64 policies

In terms of definitions and conceptualizations, the overall empirical pattern could be characterized as taken-for-granted or implicit. For example, *scientific knowledge* is defined implicitly by references to distinctions between quantitative and qualitative science, the value and reliability of randomized controlled experiments, and different degrees of scientific evidence (e.g., SBU, 2001, 2015; NBHW, 2004, 2010). Other examples of implicit definitions are those of EBP, in which the three included knowledge imperatives and their relations are seldom defined, rendering the definition, in practice, more or less undefined.

However, examples exist of explicit definitions. For example, *organizational knowledge* is defined as the systematic documentation, measurement, and evaluation of interventions and results by practitioners at the local level (e.g., Swedish Government, 2004; The Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services [SBU], 2010; NBHW, 2005a). Similarly, client-based imperatives frequently are coupled with clients' experiences and narratives (NBHW, 2003).

When comparing definitions, overlaps and contradictions emerge. For example, in one government policy, *professional knowledge* is defined as 'observations and experiences from practice that (are) systematized, documented, and communicated, and thereafter discussed, criticized, and compared as part of a cumulative knowledge development' (Swedish Government, 2008, p. 25). Comparing this definition with the one above for *organizational knowledge* reveals significant overlap in terms of both terminology and content. One example of contradictions between definitions is a government policy equating professional knowledge with formal credit-based education (Swedish Government, 2005) – a definition that significantly departs from the aforementioned government policy definition of *professional knowledge* as 'observations and experiences from practice'. Other examples can be

related to definitions and conceptualizations of EBP. For instance, whereas most policies define EBP by referring to its three constituent knowledge imperatives – scientific, professional, and client-based – one government policy conceptualizes it as knowledge developed and applied by professionals at the street level (Swedish Government, 2009).

Plurality and relations

The second research question concerns the degree to which a plurality of knowledge imperatives exists in social service policies, and if so, to what extent such a plurality is acknowledged in the policies. Of interest is also whether plans to handle this plurality are put forward.

Similar to findings in previous research (Avby, 2015; Pawson et al., 2003), the dominant configuration is a plurality of knowledge imperatives. Most policies include two or more knowledge imperatives (51 out of 64), while 12 policies include only one, either scientific or client-based (see Table 3). Over time, no trends could be identified in relation to the degree of plurality. That is, in this context and during the 1992-2015 period, a plurality of knowledge imperatives is a permanent configuration.

Table 3
Plurality of knowledge imperatives

Zero logics	1 out of 64 policies
One logic	12 out of 64 policies
Two logics	13 out of 64 policies
Three logics	11 out of 64 policies
Four logics	20 out of 64 policies
Five logics	7 out of 64 policies

Although most policies can be characterized by a plurality of imperatives, this is seldom addressed in the policies (e.g., Swedish Government, 1995; NBHW, 2000, 2011). For example, one chapter of a policy could discuss the importance of client-based knowledge for social services while another chapter addresses the significance of scientific knowledge (NBHW, 2005a), without the policy ever acknowledging the co-existence of or relationships between the two imperatives.

Some policies nonetheless acknowledge the plurality of imperatives. One set of policies either avoids stressing conflicts between imperatives or considers them non-problematic. For example, evidence-based practice is often considered a unifying imperative (NBHW, 2011, 2012, 2015; Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2011). Moreover, science is assumed to be a foundation for other knowledge imperatives (NBHW, 2005b, 2015; Swedish Government, 2011), and organizational

knowledge is said to strengthen, complement, and serve as a model for knowledge production in general (NBHW, 2000, 2011; Swedish Government, 2010).

When a plurality of imperatives is discussed, much uncertainty is displayed, and specific guidance or conclusions for managing the plurality are rarely provided (Swedish Government, 2001; NBHW, 2000, 2005a; Swedish Government, 2008). As an illustration, one policy states that 'another conflict involves that professional experience and scientific knowledge sometimes can stand in opposition to what users want and prioritize. The question of how the balance should be made is so far described as unresolved' (NBHW, 2003, p. 42). In the same policy, it is recognized explicitly that this conflict could be a challenge for social services (NBHW, 2003, p. 69).

Another set of policies discusses challenges related to a plurality of knowledge imperatives. One category of challenges is related to the risk that a certain knowledge imperative could dominate and influence other imperatives. Science could for example be given categorical preference, as 'science risks being a new basis to determine what is best for the user or client in a similar way to what professional authority-based practice used to be' (NBHW, 2003. p. 42). Similarly, political-layman knowledge could affect professional knowledge adversely (Swedish Government, 2009). Another category of plurality challenges is related to knowledge authority and determining the quality of outcomes. One policy asks, 'Who decides whether the outcome and the quality are satisfactory – the client, the family, the profession, politicians, or scientists?' (NBHW, 2000, p. 47). A third category of challenges is the significance of institutions and context, in which combining knowledge imperatives 'depend on national and local context, such as the law, guidelines, and the resources available' (NBHW, 2008, p. 9).

Finally, some empirical results indicate that the authority of certain knowledge imperatives at times must be limited. This mainly pertains to client-based knowledge. For example, general statements in the policies include how client-based knowledge must be limited by regulations, priorities, science, and experience (NBHW, 2005a). More specific recommendations argue that client-based knowledge should be limited when indisputable scientific evidence establishes long-term consequences that the client cannot foresee (NBHW, 2003; Swedish Government, 2009), if research indicates that a service could harm clients (NBHW, 2003) or if clients neither want nor can generate their own knowledge (NBHW, 2003; 2004).

Rationality and implementation

We address the third research question by presenting the rationality and plans stated in the policies for implementing knowledge imperatives in social work practice. Regarding rationality, national public agencies consider implementing knowledge in Swedish social services important for several reasons (e.g., Swedish

Government, 2001, 2010; Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2011; NBHW, 2003, 2012). The first is to increase the quality of social services, for example, by enabling the identification of intervention effects, leading to increased user safety and serving as a foundation for prioritizations and future developments. Second, economic considerations, including lower costs that pinpoint the most cost-efficient methods and general macroeconomic benefits, are also cited. Third, a set of arguments related to societal effects is put forth, including that knowledge will promote democracy and make social services more legitimate.

In terms of implementation, although public agencies promote most knowledge imperatives at the national level, middle management and professionals in local municipalities, as well as other social service providers, are seen as responsible for their actual implementation. In the case of scientific knowledge, public agencies at the national level, for example, will develop guidelines and recommendations, including identifying the best and most cost-efficient interventions (Swedish Government, 2014; NBHW, 2010, 2011). The local level subsequently is required to utilize these guidelines and recommendations in decision making, management, educational programs and supervision. Middle management and professionals at the local level are also responsible for systematically documenting and evaluating interventions, as well as contributing to the national level's aggregation of experiences.

Plans for implementation are sometimes formulated in abstract terms (e.g., Swedish Government, 2014; Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2011). For example, a government-issued policy argues that social services are insufficiently EBP-based and only recommends that social services need to be reformed accordingly. More concrete recommendations also exist. A repeated formulation for reforming social services, for example in relation to EBP, includes four specific activities: 'More research and qualified evaluations of social work performance, quality, and efficiency; better conditions for the profession to develop evidence-based practice; a better structure for monitoring activities; and clarified client perspective(s) in relation to social service work' (e.g. NBHW, 2011, p. 9; see also Swedish Government, 2014).

Analytical findings

In this section and the following, we will try to answer our fourth research question: what enables and how is a plurality of knowledge perspectives maintained over time? The answer to this question is important for several reasons: It contributes to research on mechanisms that uphold a co-existence of various logics (e.g., Thornton et al., 2012). It is also important for politicians, policymakers, and social workers, as a plurality of knowledge imperatives, on the one hand, may counter

an implementation of knowledge reforms in social services, and on the other, may balance different societal interest, provide legitimacy and stability to social services, and allowing for a wider latitude in discretion.

In analyzing the empirical results, this article adopts an institutional-logics framework that focuses on mechanisms for enabling a co-existence of logics in a context (Thornton et al., 2012) – in our case, the co-existence of knowledge imperatives in individual social service policies at the national level in Sweden. Of the seven mechanisms in the framework, we identified four in our empirical material – assimilation, blending, expansion and segregation – that together increase our understanding of how a plurality of knowledge imperatives is sustained.

Starting with the mechanism of assimilation, the main example of how existing imperatives were incorporated into a new, overarching, or dominant imperative is EBP. We found several examples in the empirical material how scientific, professional, and client-based imperatives were assimilated into the imperative of EBP (e.g., NBHW, 2011, 2012, 2015; Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2011). Other examples of assimilation included how some knowledge imperatives were supposed to govern other imperatives. For example, organizational knowledge was regarded as a model for knowledge production in general (e.g., NBHW, 2000, 2011; Swedish Government, 2010).

Although less frequent, another identified mechanism was blending, the process by which existing imperatives acknowledge, appreciate, and incorporate norms and values from other imperatives. Here, we found examples of how organizational knowledge was said to complement other imperatives, and how EBP not only strived to unify other imperatives, but could also be argued to incorporate norms and values from these imperatives (e.g., NBHW, 2011, 2012, 2015).

EBP can also be seen as an example of the mechanism expansion, which allows imperatives to be transmitted from one welfare field to another. In the case of EBP, the concept is transmitted from the medical field and its concept Evidence-Based Medicine (EBM).

We also found examples of segregation, the means by which imperatives could co-exist in total autonomy from each other (e.g., Swedish Government, 1995; NBHW, 2000, 2011). Although most policies could be characterized by a plurality of knowledge imperatives, several examples existed of policies discussing different imperatives in separate sections of the document without ever acknowledging the plurality. One policy considered, for example, how user, professional, and scientific knowledge could develop social services without explicitly describing how these imperatives should relate to each other (NBHW, 2005b).

In addition to the four mechanisms in the framework, we identified two additional institutional mechanism – contradiction (e.g., Friedland & Alford, 1991) and neglect (for example, Coase, 2005). Contradiction as a mechanism explicitly acknowledges the conflicting nature of co-existing imperatives. Different knowledge imperatives could for example impact each other adversely, some imperatives were argued to be more appropriate in a given context, and potential complications of combining

imperatives were discussed (NBHW, 2000, 2005; Swedish Government, 2009). One set of policies considered plurality non-problematic or referred to contextual requirements (e.g., NBHW, 2003; Swedish Government, 2009). An example here is a policy stating that layman knowledge and professional knowledge were 'overlapping' (Swedish government, 1999, p. 294).

Finally, we could also identify examples of neglect, as some knowledge imperatives explicitly were disregarded in favor of other imperatives that were given higher priority. This concerned mostly client-based knowledge. For example, scientific knowledge was supposed to be prioritized over client-based knowledge if the requested service was proven to be harmful (NBHW, 2003); or if clients lacked the ability to foresee long-term consequences (NBHW, 2003; Swedish Government, 2009).

Discussion

In summary, our main empirical findings include, first, the plurality of knowledge imperatives in individual social service policies at the national level in Sweden, and second, the permanent character of this plurality. Our main analytical finding is that the latter result is sustained by a set of mechanisms, including assimilation, blending, expansion, segregation, contradiction, and neglect. In the following we will discuss how these findings can be understood in relation to the Swedish welfare model and its modus operandi at the ideological-administrative level. We will also comment on some of the consequences for practice.

The common view in extant literature has been that policies are rational instruments for governing at a distance and generating desired collective action. Although this perspective has been challenged by constructionist and institutional perspectives, the modernistic faith in progress informed by reason has been further emphasized in recent decades through the concept of evidence-based policymaking (Sanderson, 2002); not only influencing the individual social services, but also public policy areas such as education, housing, transport and urban policy (Davies et al., 2000). The literature offers several explanations for this rise and maintenance of evidence-based policy, including for example, a pragmatic and anti-ideological turn in contemporary politics, an increased distrust of professional power, and the growth of knowledge management systems (Pawson, 2006). However, as institutional theory informs us, policy agents do not only need to govern at a distance or generate desired collective action, but also to adhere to diverse ideals and interests in the institutional environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011).

We have already described how the institutional field of social services in Sweden comprises independent, but in practice, mutually dependent authorities on both

the national and local levels, populated by national and local politicians, central bureaucrats, and professional social workers. This field is furthermore part of a political welfare ideology often labelled the Swedish model (Bergh & Erlingsson, 2008; Rothstein & Trädgårdh, 2007). One of the main operative rationales of this model is the inclusion of various political, private, and civil society stakeholders in government investigations, legislation, and policy formation. This has led to a pursuit and state of consensus as the desired ultimate goal to handle conflicting public values and interests in society (Rothstein & Trädgårdh, 2007).

In such a national institutional context with a cooperative nature, a plurality of knowledge imperatives in social service policies could be regarded as a consequence of the collective pursuit of including different societal stakeholders and values. That is, for some stakeholders, not least the government and members of locally elected political committees, the plurality of imperatives could represent the mutual recognition of these values, providing external support, implicitly addressing contradictory norms and interests, and promoting images of rationality and societal authority. The taken-for-granted and contradictory definitions of knowledge imperatives, top-down approaches and abstract plans for their implementation, all support this explanation. Thus, rather than striving to promote increased quality, economic benefits, and client effects in social services, social service policies' pluralistic content could instead be interpreted as a vehicle for societal balance and stability.

At the same time, social work handles complex human problems often including combinations of socio-economic and mental health problems. For the profession, this demands support from several knowledge sources. The taken-for-granted and contradictory definitions and abstract handling of conflicts and implementation in the policies, can in a way be seen as a de-coupling of national policy from local practice (e.g. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Brunsson, 2009). Something that makes room for the profession to continue develop such a practice. In the international development of social work practice, we can also see new perspectives, such as evidenced-informed practice, promote and mediate the coexistence of several forms of knowledge for the benefit of the clients. In this, a key task for the profession is to defend the discretion of social workers as a necessary condition for such a task.

Conclusions and future research

In this article, we have analyzed a welfare field situated in the middle of a plurality of knowledge imperatives and contradictions between different institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). Rather than addressing these challenges, however, politicians, central bureaucrats, and researchers have often taken a stand for or against specific imperatives and institutional logics.

Furthermore, only a limited amount of research has been conducted from a more comprehensive perspective, such as exploring the plurality of knowledge imperatives in itself, as well as the types of mechanisms that may sustain such a plurality at the policy level. Thus, more research is needed in terms of studying and analyzing the plurality of knowledge imperatives and its impact on social work practice in terms of discretionary space, range and choice of interventions. One aim should be to contribute to a development towards an increased reciprocity between the actual conditions and needs of practice and other national policy interest in the field.

Addressing these research needs, this article has contributed to extant literature in the following ways. First, the empirical results verify more recent scholarly interest in a plurality of logics – in this case, knowledge imperatives – as a permanent, rather than temporary, configuration. Second, the article presents and applies an analytical framework combining an institutional perspective in general and an institutional-logics approach in particular to analyze the mechanisms by which a plurality of knowledge imperatives can be sustained at the national policy level (cf. Thornton et al., 2012). Finally, based in institutional theory and characteristics of the Swedish welfare state, we have offered a tentative explanation for the maintenance of this plurality at the national political-administrative level.

Several caveats and limitations in our study should be acknowledged. The study is empirically delimited to national policies, child and family care, and substance-abuse treatment in individual social services, one European country and a specific time period around the turn of the millennium. Thus, we could not formulate empirically supported conclusions beyond these limitations. However, the occurrence of a plurality of knowledge imperatives in social service policies is in line with results from other studies. The analysis of the empirical data is also theory-driven and contextually grounded, increasing the possibility of evaluating our results' relevance from the perspective of comparable policy processes and contexts in other countries and institutional fields (Seale, 1999; Yin, 2009). Therefore, future research is encouraged to address the applicability of the analytical framework to other levels of policy formation in social services, different countries and other time periods.

Disclosure of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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