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The flexibility of family co-ordinators in complex family interventions: building relations over time with families living in sustained poverty

Familiekoordinatorers fleksibilitet i komplekse familieintervensjoner: Relasjonsbygging med familier i vedvarende lavinntekt over tid

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ABSTRACT

Complex family interventions represent innovative yet contested policy approaches to child poverty and their follow-up with families with complex needs laid down in several national policies. Across welfare state regime contexts, the role of the family co-ordinator is central to these approaches. This role and the work of co-ordinators in interaction with families, family members, and other services deserve further exploration to increase knowledge of the contribution of such interventions. In this article, we explore the role of the family co-ordinator in the Norwegian family intervention programme, *New Patterns – Safe Upbringing*. The research builds upon fieldwork conducted over several intervals (2019–2021). Family co-ordinators were followed in their everyday work practices, and they were interviewed over several rounds. In our analysis, we look at how the family co-ordinator role and relations with families evolve over time as knowledge increases and the family situation changes. Our research findings demonstrate the importance of flexibility and temporality in complex family interventions, including their role for instigating trust in the relationships between family co-ordinators and families, their role as cultural and system interpreters, and as such providing means for successful targeted support.

ABSTRAKT

Komplekse familieintervensjoner representerer innovative men omstridte tilnærminger til barnefattigdom. Oppfølging med familier med sammensatte behov er formulert i flere nasjonale strategier, og familiekoordinatorer har en sentral rolle i disse på tvers av velferdsregimer. Denne rollen og arbeidet som familiekoordinatorer gjør trengs mer utforskning som ledd i å øke kunnskapen om familiekoordinatorers bidrag i slike intervensjoner. I denne artikkelen utforsker vi familiekoordinator-rollen i det norske familieintervensjonsprogrammet *Nye mønstre – trygg*

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oppvekst. Forskningen bygger på flere runder med feltarbeid i tidsrommet 2019-2021. Familiekoordinatorer ble fulgt i sitt dagligdagse arbeid, og de ble intervjuet flere ganger. Analysen undersøker hvordan familiekoordinator-rollen og relasjonene med familiene utvikler seg over tid ettersom kunnskapen om familiene øker og familiens situasjon endrer seg. Forskningsfunnene understreker betydningen av fleksibilitet og tid i komplekse familieintervensjoner, herunder viktigheten av å etablere tillit mellom familiekoordinatorer og familier, deres rolle som kulturoversettere og systemoversettere og iverksetting av virkemidler for målrettet innsats.

Introduction

Child poverty is a growing policy concern of our times because it increases the risk of social exclusion in adulthood. In Norway, the number of children growing up in low-income families has been on the rise since the 2000s, and this has been of growing concern to successive governments and welfare services. Several factors relate to this increase, such as immigration, as well as demographic and policy changes (Fløtten & Grødem, 2014; Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2022). There is a growing awareness that the welfare services are not well designed to meet the complex needs of low-income families. Child and family poverty is increasingly seen as a 'wicked problem' that needs attention across a spectrum of public services and civic society. Siloing, workfare orientation with strengthened conditionality, and a lack of holistic perspectives and effective co-ordination measures across services are common concerns (Mølland et al., 2021; Sagatun & Ask, 2020). A related issue is the lack of trust in the services among some groups (e.g. Tembo et al., 2021). Classed, racial, and cultural dimensions of welfare institutions' behaviour towards clients have recently been investigated in relation to child protection services (e.g. Fauske et al., 2018). There is also a reported lack of child and family perspectives integrated into welfare services (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2021). Hence, the Norwegian case shares many characteristics with international developments (Walsh et al., 2019).

As a response to flaws in the welfare service system that hinder effective management of the complexities of low-income families' struggles, there have been several international attempts to develop co-ordination measures and complex family interventions (Atwool, 2021; Ball et al., 2016; Lambert & Crossley, 2017; Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2022; Szarfenberg, 2021). Programmes and measures involving such interventions have recently been developed at the national, regional, and local levels in Norway (Mølland et al., 2021; Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2022). One of these, *New Patterns–Safe Upbringing*, provides selected families with intensive support for up to five years with the aim of breaking generational patterns. The 'New patterns' programme is developed by Kristiansand municipality and is a family co-ordinator model that develop methods and techniques of systematic mapping and follow-up, including the co-ordinative tool 'the family plan'. A handbook is developed for guiding the family co-ordinators' work, and skills and professional development are strengthened through formal gatherings of a programme-internal family co-ordinator network (for further details on the New Patterns programme, see Mølland et al., 2021). The programme is being researched by a multi-disciplinary mixed methods study.

In this article, we investigate the relationship between family co-ordinators and families in *New Patterns* as a particular form of social service marked by flexibility, paying attention to the role of temporality, timing, and flexibility in family co-ordinators' work. The complex family intervention, led by the family co-ordinator, is an intervention process oriented towards the present and future for both parents and children in the household. Hence, increased understanding of the flexible and temporal dimensions of this relation and the work of the family co-ordinator, is of significance. The family co-ordinator has a wide mandate to cater for the families' specific needs, and generous time resources to provide support to the enrolled families, with a portfolio of up to ten families within a 5-year follow-up plan. This is a long period for a service intervention. Our temporal approach highlights

experiences and histories of families' relations with services before and after entering New Patterns, as well as family co-ordinators' accounts of their role, the timespan, and evolving knowledge of the families' situation, challenges, and resources. What is the co-ordinators' role in complex family interventions? How does temporality affect their role and relationship with the families? In the following section, we provide a brief overview of research on welfare services, complex family interventions, and temporality. Furthermore, we describe our data and research methods. Our empirical analysis focuses first on the early stages of the family co-ordinators' work with the families, and thereafter sheds light on their shift of focus during the intervention process, before drawing conclusions.

Welfare services, complex family interventions, and temporality

The broader research on welfare service work reflects the temporal dimension in several ways, including longitudinal research on service users' pathways over their service and life course, the time resources available to professional staff, user–staff relationships, and the design of services, although temporality is often more implicit than explicit. A range of studies indicate that tight managerial control, high caseloads, and limited time for service user follow-up dominate ordinary employment and welfare services, leading to barriers, burdens, and lack of continuity for service users (e.g. Dubois, 2010; Morris et al., 2017; Murphy & Skillen, 2015; Sinai-Glazer & Krane, 2021). Murphy and Skillen (2015) illustrate how accountability mechanisms in the reformed bureaucracy in England contribute to time compression across professional activities and show the consequences of this time compression for the exercise of professional judgement at the street level. Thus, the development of services such as complex intervention programmes can be seen as compensatory strategies to facilitate reaching service users.

A particular form of temporality in the welfare research literature relates to waiting. Waiting is documented to be a central part of dealing with welfare services and part of power relations with the potential for regulation and domination of welfare service users (Lundberg, 2018; Auyero, 2012; Dubois, 2010; Reid, 2013; Soss, 1999). In her book *The Political Value of Time*, Cohen (2018) situates deadlines and waiting in the fabric of citizenship and democratic architecture. She shows how quantities of time are used to confer and deny citizenship rights, and how the devaluation of some groups is an overlooked form of injustice.

There is a strong tradition in social work of providing support for poor families that goes back to the roots of the discipline (Pierson, 2022), although the concept of complex family interventions is of newer date. In the UK, the *Troubled Families Programme* (TFP) was implemented on a large scale in the aftermath of youth riots in several British cities in 2011 and has been developed in various forms since then (Lambert & Crossley, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2018). Various versions of complex family intervention measures have also been implemented in Norway in recent years (Lundberg, 2018; Gyüre et al., 2020; Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2021; Tøge et al., 2020). Although there are variations between programmes, all complex family interventions target families with sustained low incomes, in addition to multiple challenges related to a range of services, including social security, employment, schooling, kindergarten, health services, and child protection. Family co-ordinators have a key role, although the resources and time available to them differ between programmes. Davies (2015) identifies five core elements in complex interventions that are also present in *New Patterns*: '(1) a dedicated worker, dedicated to a family; (2) practical 'hands-on' support; (3) a persistent, assertive, and challenging approach; (4) considering the family as a whole – gathering the intelligence; (5) common purpose and agreed action' (p. 7).

Complex family interventions are intertwined into wider spectra of policies aimed at families with specific characteristics. The British TFP was backed by policy rhetoric of personal responsibility, antisocial behaviour, and localising problem behaviour in families (Lambert, 2018; Parr & Hayden, 2019). Lambert and Crossley (2017) situate the focus of TFP in a historic and current context of labelling the poor and linking TFP to contemporary forms of neoliberal governance of 'the family', using the targeted implementation of a range of family intervention projects. The UK programme has been

controversial, owing to harsh rhetoric concerning the affected families, the large number of families involved, and the lack of positive results from the measures (Ball et al., 2016; Boddy et al., 2016; Lambert & Crossley, 2017; Parr & Churchill, 2019). The policy justifying the Norwegian programmes focuses on macro structures following from social inequalities, while the rhetoric targeting the individual choices and 'troubles' has been toned down. However, the Scandinavian measures too are contested, as a major randomised controlled trial study of the Norwegian HOLF programme indicated that it did not produce a measurable increase in labour participation by parents (Gyüre et al., 2021 Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2022;). The HOLF project ended when the project period was over.

In the research literature on complex family interventions, temporality mostly features as an implicit dimension; however, temporality is discussed in several research articles on the TFP in the UK, in relation to life-course perspectives. Parr and Hayden (2019) highlight that whereas the multiple needs of the families targeted by TFP are well documented, the wider contexts of their lives are less well explored and understood. They argue for research that includes biographical, longitudinal, and temporal aspects, especially on the pathways between childhood and adulthood. Other research points to the importance of exploring timing and 'critical moments' (see Lareau, 2015; Wenham, 2017) in working with poor families. As Wenham (2017) points out: 'Family troubles should be interpreted against the wider structural context that captures movement between the past, present and future' (p. 151).

Methods and data

The public innovation project 'New Patterns, safe up-bringing' is aimed at helping participating families through family co-ordinators' intervention. It is led by Kristiansand municipality and has been implemented in 12 municipalities in Agder and Rogaland counties. Families with children aged 0–17 years old are recruited, based on documented household income below 60% of the equivalent median income in the population combined with complex and long-term needs and relations with multiple welfare services (Mølland et al., 2021). There are equal shares of native Norwegians and families from immigrant backgrounds. Most parents have low educational levels, and selected families live in both urban and rural areas. Families that are assessed for care takeover by the child protection services are not selected to participate in *New Patterns*. Since 2015, nearly 200 families ranging in size from two to nine members have been recruited. The family co-ordinators in *New Patterns* are trained social workers and/or related professionals with varied work experience in the welfare and health sectors. They serve up to 10 families each, for periods of up to five years. They are not involved in casework and hold no formal power over families, but they co-ordinate and advise families and co-operate with service workers, public services, and civil society organisations.

Our research project on which this article relies explores local approaches of family co-ordinators and the families' experiences over time. Through fieldwork and a set of qualitative data collection approaches, we explore experiences and practices, dilemmas, and tensions that may arise during the intervention. Our data include interviews with family co-ordinators, managers, and family members, as well as fieldwork and shadowing of family co-ordinators in everyday work settings. We conducted both individual and focus group interviews with family co-ordinators (N = 20) and leaders (N = 10), as well as interviews with parents (N = 10) on four occasions. The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to change our plans for fieldwork and data collection on several occasions. We conducted our first major data collection in October and November 2019, followed by a second less extensive round of fieldwork in early 2020 and focus group interviews with family co-ordinators to document experiences of lockdown and Covid in the summer of 2020. Then, we conducted a fourth round of interviews and observations in the autumn of 2021. In the final round of data collection, we interviewed those family co-ordinators that had followed a single family for three years or more (N = 10). Thus, during the project, nearly the entire population of family co-ordinators and management in *New Patterns* participated in interviews, many two or three times.

In addition to interviews, we shadowed family co-ordinators through daily work activities. The method of shadowing is a particular fieldwork method that has the potential to provide detailed primary data on organisational life and is meant to complement information from interviews (McDonald, 2005). We shadowed seven family co-ordinators for a total of four weeks in their everyday work. We went with them on home visits and joined them in welfare service meetings with family members and welfare services, in meetings and office work situations, on phone calls with services, lunches with colleagues, and on missions to schools and other places. We also interviewed 10 parents participating in *New Patterns*, and we have met several families and parents during our fieldwork while participating in service meetings and home visits together with the family co-ordinators. Hence, we build on extensive fieldwork that covers both the pre – and post-pandemic situations. Drawn together, the data provided rich insight into the work of the family co-ordinators.

Data analysis

We are two researchers who collaborated on all phases of data collection and analysis, one researcher with special competence on relations between service users and welfare services, the other with expertise on family relations and family policies. In line with Parr and Churchill (2019) in our use of qualitative, mixed, and case study approaches, we investigate *how* family intervention works, rather than *if* it works. Because this work is highly sensitive to context, we have aimed to provide a detailed description (Geertz, 1973) of the family co-ordinators' work as a particular form of social service. Therefore, we pay attention to the family co-ordinators' accounts and understandings of their work. Although we do not present family interview data in this article, they have helped us informing the analysis of the family co-ordinators role, and the importance of the family's experiences with prior and present struggles, unproductive waiting, and trust issues regarding ordinary welfare services. Hence, our explorative understandings of the co-ordinators' roles are deducted from a combination of fieldwork and interviews with a longitudinal design.

We analysed the co-ordinator interviews collected in all four phases of data collection as a thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2021), and we discussed our findings together in all phases of data collection. During the analysis, we discovered temporality to be an important dimension of this work that also has analytical potential. The temporal approach highlights experiences and histories of families' relations with services before and after entering *New Patterns*, as well as family co-ordinators' accounts of their role, the timespan, and evolving knowledge of the families' situation, challenges, and resources. Our main themes in this article, on trust building, timing, and targeting through a combination of administrative, practical, and emotional support to the families, stood out as central experiences in the interview material with the family coordinators. These were also important themes in the fieldwork. The theme of family coordinators' evolving relations with children in transition to adulthood, was deducted from an analysis of the final round of group interviews with those with the longest experience (3-5 years in the family intervention). We found it vital to include an analysis of these themes in the same article, as they inform the importance of the five-year follow-up time span for both parents and children in New Patterns. We have structured the empirical analysis as three parts relating to different modes and dimensions of the family co-ordinators' relationships with families related to primary work tasks, trust building, and to the evolving relationship with families and children.

Ethics

The research project is registered with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and meets formal ethical research guidelines. We have continually engaged with ethical assessments related to the data collection process beyond the formal approvals. The family co-ordinators work with people in vulnerable situations. They are close to family members, so we sometimes came close when shadowing them, which required an active and ongoing reflection and assessment of whether, how, and when to participate.

Empirical analysis

Family co-ordinators at work: building trust and change through a combination of administrative, practical, and emotional support

The family co-ordinator role in *New Patterns* is that of a complex professional key worker, combining practical, emotional, and administrative support with the intention to increase stability and make grounds for positive change concerning the families. As one of them summarised her work:

> We are not only co-ordinators on the system level; sometimes we are next of kin, social support, 'friend', mental nurse, taxi driver … we are a lot of things on the system level, co-ordinating and co-operating with the other services and getting them going, enabling co-operation, but also down on the ground, helping them with homework and getting them through exams (…). If there is something that nobody does, that is really something that we must consider doing.

Family co-ordinators have a very open and flexible role description because they are not part of the ordinary social services and are meant to perform their work in a flexible way adjusted to each family's needs. Thus, the family co-ordinators have the possibility of helping with issues other front-line service workers would have no opportunity to assist with. When enrolled in *New Patterns*, their personal family co-ordinator starts by asking the family what is important for them to receive assistance with. This is a central part of the mapping methods developed in *New Patterns*, which makes family participation and voice a priority. Then, the co-ordinator start working with the family on a range of issues simultaneously. They start mapping the family's financial situation, social needs, health situation, housing situation, and so forth. This can be a long process, but the start of this mapping process provides the family co-ordinator with things to work on. In the mapping, they collaborate with other services, as well as the collegium of family co-ordinators, supervised and coached by the head of the family co-ordinator unit.

Second, they become engaged in helping families with practical tasks. This includes assisting them in booking appointments with public services and health care, providing a personal system for overviewing and paying bills, filling in a digital form, applying for a job, assisting with children's homework, driving to the doctor, or helping a family to buy and pick up and carry wood, as well as instructing them how to fire up a wood stove. A particular set of help relates to children's birthday parties, which most Norwegian children consider to be important and value highly (Danielsen & Bendixsen, 2020), but several *New Patterns* families did not arrange any. Organising a birthday party takes some skills and resources relating to planning, cake baking, inviting friends, as well as financial costs. Other examples include planning and assisting with moving, guiding the process of divorce from a husband, or dealing with grief. By providing practical help and emotional support of many sorts, the family co-ordinators show themselves to be useful to the family from the start.

Third, the family co-ordinators become involved in co-ordinating administrative work with educational, health, and welfare services that the families are (or should have been) in communication with, as well as non-government organisations (NGOs) that offer material goods, services, and/or leisure activities. They find that many of the parents they serve have undiscovered needs and often rights to benefits or public services of which they are unaware, or they do not know how to apply for: 'We often see that mum or dad has tried to get in touch with the services; they are, in a way, rejected. It's like 'no, this is someone else's responsibility; you have to apply'.' They assist families by offering their increasing knowledge of the family's situation to their case service workers, to start diagnostic investigations of the health services, or to get the services to work better with them. These families have considerable experience of unproductive waiting in the bureaucratic apparatus of the welfare services. Many of them have moved frequently, owing to splits from partners, evictions, or enforced moves owing to inadequate or poor housing standards. Although they are formally a part of the public welfare service system themselves, they often have a critical eye for the flaws and barriers in the system that they sometimes find contributing to locking families into poverty (see also Mølland et al., 2023). This process includes administrative barriers

relating to matters such as social assistance, the strictness of the active labour market policies, and housing offices. Welfare services are increasingly structured through standardised operationalisation of people-processing routines. Family intervention challenges these operations. The family co-ordinators assist the families in successful applications for better housing. Hence, they locate the underuse of services and benefits and help the family to apply for them. In this way, they often contribute to increasing the families' income and start or reorient the follow-up from other welfare services. Their co-ordination efforts and administrative support are also important in starting processes in the health services relating to unaddressed health issues of family members, and to prepare the ground for employment or education; 'we often see that the families are provided with more accurate help; we make visible the needs in such a way that the assistance need is made clear in a way that it wasn't before' (family co-ordinator).

Timing, trust, and targeting

As highlighted above, the way the family co-ordinators build their relationship with the families is time-sensitive work that requires availability, a dedicated focus over time, and a willingness to work along the lines of providing practical help, emotional support, and co-ordination of services. The family co-ordinators highlight the significance of spending time with the families. They demonstrate to the family that they are available to them, provide their names and direct phone numbers, and stress that the families can ask for advice on anything. In this way, they build continuity in their relationship with the family.

Although some families are easy for the family co-ordinator to contact, others are reserved, often owing to negative experiences with welfare services in the past. Thus, dealing with trust issues has become an integral part of their work. This is one of several ways that the family co-ordinators and the families address past experiences.

> Those that struggle to trust and that really hold their guard up – with those it is especially positive that we have so much time available because they have often been a little critical and abrupt with the services and then they have been quickly dismissed, whereas in this project we can spend some time building trust. To take the necessary time, to allow some breaks, when they don't show up … I feel that we can be very flexible in encounters with families.

The family co-ordinator can get to know the families and to approach them in creative ways, using timing to create trust. The family co-ordinators may at times step gently to keep good relations and seek ways to help them without placing them in a position where they are explicitly faced with their weakness. For instance, one family co-ordinator sensed a guarded mother who did not like home visits in the beginning, she noticed that the mother eased up when talking on the phone. The family co-ordinator then started to call her, and they addressed various issues that way. Later, she was invited to home visits. The family co-ordinators are loyal to the mapping principles of *New Patterns*, stressing the significance of enabling the family to define their need, and allowing them to have their own boundaries. At times, the family co-ordinator's professional judgement may be challenged:

> I find it hard not to become controlling, for at times in my experience, they do not have a full overview of their own situation. In the first mapping we ask about debt, and they say 'No, no, I have no debt, no credit card debt now', and then (later) I go into the debt register and then 'Poof poof!' (…) We uncover quite a bit of that, and then I sit and wait to get started and I think that Oh lord, I would like to get an overview of all that debt, but she thinks that should be one of the aims further down the road.

To be professional for the family co-ordinator is to respect the boundaries of the families with the aim of enhancing their abilities to take charge in the process of change. Although this way of working may be a test of patience, it demonstrates the potential of flexibility, the importance of sensitivity, and the skill of adapting to the family's needs. They learn what is effective and how to work in the specific case. Therefore, during the mapping process, the family co-ordinators work together with the family to set targets to achieve. They stress that objectives should come from the family members rather

than from the co-ordinator. In practice, however, this is a process in which the family co-ordinators often struggle to find the right balance. Nevertheless, these first steps, while being sensitive to what the family wants, have proven important in building a strong relationship of trust, enabling the family co-ordinators to unravel more of the challenges and resources in the families that can enhance the possibility of identifying targeted solutions for families in the long run. Later in the follow-up process, when the most pressing issues are addressed, family co-ordinators can use their more stable position in the family to set new goals and achievements for them to pursue.

Evolving relations with children in transition to adulthood

The relationship that the family co-ordinator develops with the family usually starts with the bond to the parents, most often the mother, sometimes the father, or both parents. It varies according to how close the family co-ordinator feels that (s)he is with each child. They may become closer to some than to others, and they develop a relationship with the children over time.

The family co-ordinators find that the relationship with children develops over time. The family co-ordinator keeps coming on home visits. By seeing the co-ordinators regularly during home visits, children may learn that they help the family. In this way, the family co-ordinator builds trust, even with the younger children, even if they do not always work closely with them. Several family co-ordinators talk about children that may be sceptical of them in the beginning, but they gradually start to ask them about little things, such as homework or other issues. As one family co-ordinator said: 'In the beginning, they have observed me quite a bit and wondered what this is, where I come from. As they get to know me, I get phone calls from them, and they tell me what they want to do, or they tell me about their hobbies or everyday life' (family co-ordinator). The evolving relations with children prepare the ground for the family co-ordinator to come into position to assist them in the transition to adulthood:

> We have followed many of the families for a long time. The contact [with the parents] becomes less frequent, as they become more and more independent. I have also sensed a change in the relations to the children and youth in the families. Especially amongst the ones that go from being in the tweens to becoming 18 years old during the follow-up period, when I have different and closer contact with them. Perhaps especially in the families with the poorest starting point, I see that I am being used almost as a reserve mummy. They call for stuff that they should have had support with at home.

The family co-ordinators assist and advise youths on a range of issues, such as choice of leisure activities, how to participate in them, and educational choices. For instance, as they seek their first paid job, the family co-ordinator may assist them with writing a curriculum vitae and a job application or train them on job interviews. They may explain to them how to prepare for leaving home, how to find a place to live, what a deposit is, or how to make an appointment for dental treatment. Practical, administrative, and emotional support, which are crucial in developing relations with parents, are also activated in contact with youths later in the intervention process. Co-ordinators provide knowledge and know-how that children are expected to learn at home, but this is affected by social inequalities, and the children in these families must seek advice elsewhere. The family co-ordinators become knowledge enablers and cultural guides (cf. Lareau, 2015) for both parents and children.

Families are in constant development and change and the family co-ordinator's knowledge about the family also evolves over time. Although they establish trust with the families at an early stage, this trust is always relative and evolving. What information the family members share changes over time, and what the family co-ordinator sees and detects may change. At times, family co-ordinators express guilt over failing to detect problems earlier:

> I have some families where I feel guilty about not seeing things at an earlier stage. Five years have gone by, and now one finally understands what their home is like. At the same time, I think that when it is difficult at home, then it takes time to get to them and to explore how it really is. I have a family that I have followed for five years where the youngsters are only now starting to tell me how strict mummy really is and how much she limits them.

At the beginning of the relationship, the parents are the family co-ordinator's most important source of knowledge. Later, the family co-ordinator gains more differentiated knowledge of the family's situation, based on their own observations, collaborations with other services, and the evolving relationship with the children. Although the family co-ordinator may at times feel guilty about not detecting problems earlier, being able to do so is enabled by the process of awareness and trust building to all family members. At times, this presents the family co-ordinator with ethical dilemmas that may affect the accumulated trust of both parents and children. Children may tell them things that the parent(s) have not shared with them. Then, they must balance knowledge from different family sources. However, the sources of information provide the family co-ordinator with opportunities to assist in making changes within the family, providing more relevant help from the welfare services, and to prepare the younger members for adulthood and independence. In this way, complex family intervention practices can provide a children's and youth perspective that is often missed by ordinary services.

Concluding discussion

In this article, we have investigated the role of family co-ordinators in complex family interventions and explored the role of temporality and flexibility in establishing and building relations of trust with the family as a whole and with individual members. The family co-ordinator is a rare role in contemporary welfare services. First, it is a broad and flexible role, providing bureaucratic competence, social competence, practical skills, and emotional support to make a difference to recruited families. The empirical analysis has shown that the family co-ordinators work from both a parental perspective and a children's perspective within a generous time span. Building trust with the whole family enables co-ordinators to assist children in these families with their transition to adulthood. While helping with practical tasks and building trust, family co-ordinators increase their knowledge of the family situation and its members, in turn enabling targeted and timed action from different services and institutions. The family co-ordinators perform tasks that fall between accountability structures of services, providing help that other services will not provide. Although the centrality of the strengthened work alliance between social workers and parents is documented in previous research on complex family interventions (Gyüre et al., 2020), our study illustrates the potential of strengthening this work alliance with children and youth in transition to adulthood and providing a generous time frame for the intervention, with the ambition of facilitating positive change that goes beyond the parents to smooth the path of the younger generation.

Second, the flexibility that lies in this role in *New Patterns* is non-directive. Co-ordinators' aims are not exclusively connected to matters such as the labour market or activation policies; they have flexible goals for their work. Furthermore, they are not obliged to pursue short-term accountability measures. This makes their flexibility multidimensional and real. They are allowed in by families and work themselves into a position in which they can determine the best time for their efforts and are enabled to assist with the right things at the right time. Although this temporality represents a classical idea of social work, it has become a major challenge to achieve in the dominant form of a welfare services organisation. The family co-ordinators provide immediate practical help for families. Their help is situated in their flexible schedule and timeframe. The family co-ordinators in *New Patterns* are cultural interpreters (Lareau, 2015) of understandings of situations and problems between the different services and the families. The temporal dimension of the complex family interventions goes beyond the evolution of the knowledge of and relationship between family co-ordinators and the families; it also involves the family co-ordinators' view of the welfare services with which they collaborate. As Boddy et al. (2016) point out, the work of the family co-ordinator depends on ordinary services being available. However, they learn the implications of welfare state functions, and these become an integral part of the family co-ordinators' professional point of view. Hence, their practices also include advising or pushing the services slightly further to make them more effective for the specific family's situation and needs. Because co-ordinators gain more knowledge over time

about the family than ordinary caseworkers, they contribute understanding and categorisations that are more correct and nuanced. Hence, they can contribute to more precise solutions for the families and ameliorate the impacts of institutional categorisation processes.

These features distinguish the family co-ordinators' role in *New Patterns* from much welfare service work. Studies indicate that although social workers in ordinary welfare services express sophisticated understandings of complexity in specific family situations, when intervention occurs, their roles shift according to institutionally defined priorities: 'Family complexity is met with system and service complication; problems are identified, labelled and aligned with the most appropriate service area' (Walsh et al., 2019, p. 1056). These practices may be the outcome of high caseloads, scarce resources, and strict accountability structures that produce barriers, unproductive waiting, and a lack of continuity in service relations (Auyero, 2012; Dubois, 2010; Morris et al., 2017; Murphy & Skillen, 2015; Sinai-Glazer & Krane, 2021).

As a public service programme, New Patterns invests in building the relationship to the family for a longer timeframe than many other family intervention programmes. While some of the 12 ' New Patterns municipalities' has terminated the programme, some have implemented the programme as a permanent service, and other municipalities in Norway are curious about implementing this service. New patterns were developed to reach a group that is not covered adequately through existing services. As such, this is a local response to a social policy problem with national and international scope. However, if the New Patterns programme were to be scaled up on a national level, there are scaling risks related to modification of the service, as we have seen in other follow-up programmes providing tailored services (see Skjold & Lundberg, 2022). In this article, we have not investigated New Patterns as a programme, but we have explored the *professional role* of family co-ordinators in the *follow-up process* as an essential part of that programme. We have found the co-ordinator role that we have investigated in this research project, as a valuable and promising professional practice that work as a *system interpreter* for the families, and that may counterbalance the standardised welfare services by providing a more holistic approach to families living in sustained low-income. As our analysis indicate, flexibility in the role, combined with a generous timespan, is vital for the trust-building that may enable positive change in families and services alike.

Finally, although problem representations of child and family poverty may be harsh and blaming, as documented in the debate surrounding the implementation of the TFP in England (Ball et al., 2016; Boddy et al., 2016; Lambert & Crossley, 2017; Parr & Hayden, 2019), or focused on unrealistic short-term employment objectives, the social work field has a long-standing mandate and tools to assist families in poverty with multiple needs. Following Parr and Churchill's (2019) call for mixed methods and realistic research on family intervention practices, our analysis demonstrates the importance of the flexible role of the family co-ordinator, as in *New Patterns*. As such, the flexible role of family co-ordinators given a generous time allowance, should be met with interest and curiosity in the field of family intervention and anti-poverty policies in Europe and beyond in times to come.

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