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A specialist's perspective on the value of generalist practise: a qualitative network analysis

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Abstract

Summary: Social work practise is increasingly confronted with the dilemma of specialisation versus generalism. This article embraces the idea of a network that combines the strengths of specialist and generalist service organisations. We focus on the role of generalist service providers in a network of specialist organisations. We conduct 25 interviews with social workers in a network of service organisations in a single district in Antwerp, Belgium. Social workers (n=15) from specialist service organisations are interviewed to determine how they perceive collaboration with social workers from generalist service organisations. We also include the perspectives of 10 respondents affiliated with generalist service agencies.

Findings: The results show that generalists facilitate interactions between specialists and their clients. Their holistic perspective on the complex problems of very vulnerable clients allows them to fulfil critical functions such as brokering information and mediating when conflicts arise.

Application: Our analysis provides a better understanding of the role of generalist organisations in a network of specialist service organisations. This article concludes that further research on the importance of collaboration, networks and generalist practise is necessary to further develop a research agenda that focuses on how social work is able to address the complex problems of vulnerable target groups.

Keywords: social work, generalist practise, networks, service organisations

Introduction

Social work practise is increasingly confronted with the dilemma of specialisation versus generalism. Historically, social work has been rooted in a generalist approach. Since the early work of Perlman and Richmond, and influenced by social system theory and ecological approaches, social work practise has gained a generalist perspective (Turner, 2003). Nevertheless, there is a trend within the field of social work to divide services into specialised units and organisations (Blom, 2004). Researchers often explain this increasing need for specialisation by referring to a variety of intra- and extra-organisational factors (Perlinski, Blom, Moren, & Lundgren, 2010), such as increasing managerialism, the need for efficiency (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009) and an increasing focus on workfare (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013).

In the empirical literature, the debate about 'what is best' reveals mixed results. Some authors argue that specialisation offers an opportunity to provide in-depth knowledge on very specific, complicated client problems (Cambridge & Parkes, 2006; Ellem, Wilson, & Williams, 2012). Others note that specialisation leads to 'service gaps' that result in decreased responsiveness to specific client needs. The latter scholars argue that a generalist approach offers a more holistic and comprehensive perspective that benefits clients suffering from complex problems (Blom, 2004; Smyth, Goodman, & Glenn, 2006).

Recent studies have embraced the notion that specialist and generalist service providers must work together (Blom, 2004; Ellem et al., 2012; Kuosmanen & Starke, 2013; Perlinski, Blom, & Morén, 2013; Smyth et al., 2006; Yessian, & Broskowski, 1977). More specifically, these studies emphasise that when a network combines the strengths of generalists and specialists, it can provide more satisfying responses to the complex needs of vulnerable target groups. However, few studies address collaboration between specialist and generalist service organisations. To address this gap in the social work literature, this paper analyses the role of generalists in collaboration with specialist service agencies. We interview social workers from specialist service organisations to determine how they perceive collaboration with social workers affiliated with generalist service agencies. Our analysis also includes the perspective of generalist service agencies.

This article's unit of analysis is the service organisation. The distinction between generalists and specialists is based on Blom (2004) and Perlinski et al. (2010), who state that generalist service organisations emphasise a comprehensive and holistic view of clients' problems. These organisations work with all types of problems and client cases. Specialist organisations focus on one specific problem and one specific target group (Blom, 2004; Perlinski et al., 2010, 2013). Consequently, in this article, specialists are defined as social workers affiliated with specialist service agencies. Generalists are social workers affiliated with generalist service organisations.

We agree with research stating that the identity of specialist service providers is relatively straightforward. Specialists rely on the professional identity of their very specific knowledge base. The identity of generalists, however, is often perceived as blurry (Rose, 2011), particularly when they collaborate with a variety of specialist service agencies. Consequently, their sense of a unique professional contribution will erode (Rose, 2011). This article will therefore provide a better understanding of the role of generalist service organisations.

In what follows, we will provide a theoretical framework, and then discuss the methodology and the results of this study.

Theoretical framework

In the first paragraph of our theoretical framework, we focus on studies of generalist and specialist service organisations. We then argue that networks should combine the strengths of specialist and generalist service agencies.

Generalist versus specialist services

The existing literature primarily focuses on the perceptions of managers, social workers and clients regarding the advantages or disadvantages of specialist and generalist practise. One advantage of specialisation is role clarity (Blom, 2004; Cambridge & Parkes, 2006). Clients understand what types of services and counselling they can expect from specialist social workers (Rose, 2011). This role clarity also

benefits collaboration among social workers. In a network of specialist service providers, social workers know what type of work and expertise they can obtain from their collaborating partners. Furthermore, studies indicate that specialisation increases the social worker's skills and competences within the delimited area of his or her expertise (Blom, 2004; Cambridge & Parkes, 2006; Kuosmanen & Starke, 2013; Rose, 2011). Following this argument, Blom (2004) argues that when clients are confronted with well-defined problems, a highly competent specialist can provide effective services. These clients will benefit from the high level of expertise provided by the specialist service agency.

Nevertheless, an important disadvantage of specialisation arises when social workers encounter clients suffering from complex problems, which are often defined as 'wicked problems' (Hood, 2014). Social workers in specialist service agencies emphasise that they cannot gain an overview of all of their clients' problems (Blom, 2004). They have limited knowledge of the clients' problems outside of their area of specialisation; this is often perceived as a disadvantage in terms of responsiveness to clients who are experiencing complex problems involving various life domains (Blom, 2004; Perlinski et al., 2010). A similar concern is raised by Kuosmanen and Starke (2013). Their study acknowledges that specialisation increases the knowledge and competencies of social workers in their field of expertise. As a consequence, however, few professionals have the time and capacity to attend to their clients' multiple

problems. Service specialisation is therefore considered inadequate to meet the complex needs of very vulnerable target groups. This issue is emphasised by Smyth et al. (2006), who emphasize the risk that vulnerable, marginalised women's needs may not be adequately addressed by the various specialised services to which they turn for assistance. Specialists attempt to reduce their clients' vulnerable, complex situations (Hood, 2014; Roets, Roose, & Schiettecat, 2014; Smyth, 2006).

For this reason, the latter authors formulate an important argument in favour of generalist service providers, who have more knowledge of the context of vulnerable target groups and therefore can prevent vulnerable clients from falling through the cracks of the service net. However, we emphasize that specialist service agencies are also necessary because of their expertise in very specific problems or life domains.

We therefore agree with Blom (2004), who concludes that it is difficult to provide an answer to the question of whether generalist practise is better than specialist practise or vice versa. We agree that both types of services are crucial for vulnerable target groups suffering from complex problems involving different life domains. Such clients require a balance between a generalist perspective and highly specialised competences (Blom, 2004).

Networks of generalist and service agencies

Networks are considered 'social service vehicles' that combine the strengths of a variety

of organisations to provide services to vulnerable target groups (Provan & Milward, 1995, 2001; Raeymaeckers, 2015; Raeymaeckers & Kenis, 2015). Various studies have concluded that these service networks must consist of both specialist and generalist service providers (Ellem et al., 2012; Kuosmanen & Starke, 2013; Rose, 2011; Smyth et al., 2006; Wholey, & Huonker, 1993).

Wholey and Huonker (1993) find that generalist service providers not only are active in their clients' various life domains but also maintain connections to a wide variety of specialised organisations. Consequently, Wholey and Huonker (1993) hypothesise that generalists fulfil a crucial 'linking-pin,' or broker role, in networks with specialist service agencies (Burt, 2004). Generalists gather the necessary information about a client's problems and are then able to refer the client to appropriate specialist organisations.

Rose (2011) further addresses the crucial role of generalists within networks of specialist service providers. She argues that in the field of children's services, difficulties often arise when specialised services are confronted with clients with complex needs. Consequently, such services must engage in tasks outside their areas of expertise. For this reason, collaboration with generalists is needed to address the crucial needs of vulnerable clients that may not be met by specialist providers. These findings are confirmed in the work of Blom (2004), who argues that the compartmentalising complexity of specialised services and the insufficient professional language of

specialists when they communicate with network partners make it impossible to explain a client's complex situation to other specialists. Therefore, generalists are necessary because they grasp the client's entire context and thus are able to provide the network with critical information about the client's situation. Ellem et al. (2012) agree with this finding, noting that specialist organisations are necessary because they provide highly specialised services but are unlikely to address the full complexity of issues that their clients experience. This disadvantage is seen even when specialists collaborate. Responsibilities are divided among specialised social workers who refer clients among one another, often resulting in a 'carousel of referrals' (Roets et al., 2014, p. 10) with a detrimental effect on the client's well-being.

Following the arguments of these studies, we assume that collaboration among generalist and specialist service agencies is crucial. However, previous studies have made no attempts to unravel how networks between specialists and generalists are perceived and more specifically, how the role of generalist practise in these networks is perceived by specialist service organisations. In the next section, we focus on the methodology that we adopt to fill this gap in the social work literature.

Method

We conduct a qualitative analysis. In the paragraphs below, we first explain the selection of the district and network. In the second paragraph, we focus on how we

selected the service agencies and respondents for our qualitative data analysis. Finally, we discuss our qualitative interviews and analysis.

Selection of the network

We followed the approach developed by Laumann, Galaskiewicz, and Marsden (1978) by restricting our analysis to one network based on a set of predefined criteria used to define network boundaries. We focused on one district in Antwerp (A) in which service organisations serve large proportions of highly vulnerable populations, including foreign nationals, single-parent families, the elderly and persons receiving social assistance.

Following Provan and Milward (1995), we selected organisations that deliver services to a particular target group. Specifically, we focused on service organisations that deliver services to social assistance clients. This vulnerable target group suffers from multiple problems and therefore is best served by a network consisting of both specialist and generalist service agencies. We started by listing all of the service organisations in the selected district. We used information from each organisation's website and from interviews to determine the extent to which these organisations are in contact with social assistance clients. We identified 49 organisations that work with social assistance clients. In a subsequent step, we selected (through a social network analysis) the organisations to be used in our qualitative analysis.

Selection of service organisations

When studying networks, we need to ensure that those respondents with access to the most relevant information about the functioning of the network are included in the qualitative analysis. Research shows that information is unevenly distributed among network actors. Various studies emphasise the informational advantages of central organisations that have numerous collaborative ties within the network (Burt, 2004; David, 2013; Provan & Milward, 1995). These central actors are highly connected and therefore have greater access to critical information on issues and problems within the network than do isolated and peripheral network actors (Burt, 2004; Provan & Milward, 1995). Thus, we argue that it is crucial to include in our analysis the perspectives of respondents affiliated with these central organisations. We therefore conducted a network analysis of the 49 organisations that we selected in district A to identify the most central service agencies. To conduct this social network analysis, the researcher first contacted all 49 organisations. We included this list of 49 organisations in an online survey. We asked one key respondent from each of the 49 organisations to identify the organisations on the list with which they or their colleagues were in contact. We then asked the respondents to disclose the extent to which they or their colleagues have received/sent information or clients to/from the selected organisations. Next, we asked them to reveal the organisations with which they had participated in case coordination

meetings. The respondents then described how frequently they were in contact with certain organisations using a scale that included the following options: (1) very frequently, (2) frequently, (3) occasionally, (4) rarely, (5) very rarely and (6) never. We obtained an overall response rate of 90%. The results of this survey were used to develop the social network analysis matrix.

Using UCINET (Borgatti, Everett & Johnson, 2013), we constructed a complete or 'any links' network in which a tie between actors referred to one of three ties (informational exchange, client referral or case coordination). Following previous studies, we recorded only confirmed relations (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Through this process, we constructed a highly accurate 'any links' network for the network in the selected district. We agree with Provan and Milward (1995) that this 'any links' network allows the researcher to identify the organisations in the district that are the most influential with respect to informational exchange, client referral or case coordination. To determine the most central organisations, we calculated betweenness scores. Betweenness measures how often a given node falls along the shortest path between two other nodes and is calculated for a given node by computing the proportion of all of the shortest paths from one node to the other that pass through the focal node (Borgatti, Everett & Johnson, 2013; Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

The higher the betweenness score, the higher the centrality of the observed service organisation. We calculated this measure at the level of the individual service

organisation (Freeman, 1979), allowing us to identify the most central organisations. More precisely, if g_{ij} is the number of paths from i to j and g_{ikj} is the number of paths from i to j that pass through k , then g_{ikj}/g_{ij} is the proportion of paths from i to j that pass through k . The sum $c_k = g_{ikj}/g_{ij}$ for all i,j pairs is betweenness centrality for a given actor k in the network (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). These calculations were normalised by dividing the scores by the maximum value. The scores vary between 0 and 1. A score of 1 refers to a very high level of centrality in which all ties pass through one focal network actor, and a score of 0 indicates that an actor has no ties with other actors in the network.

We selected the 20 most central organisations and included them in our qualitative analysis. These organisations are involved in collaboration with many other agencies in the network and therefore, the respondents from these organisations have access to information that is highly relevant to our research. Table 1 lists the organisations that were included in our interviews. The organisations are ranked based on their centrality scores.

Insert Table 1

Qualitative interviews

We interviewed 20 organisations that we selected based on the social network analysis described in the previous paragraph. Following other studies (see: Farmakopoulou, 2012; Raeymaeckers, 2015; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012;

Raeymaeckers & Kenis, 2015), we interviewed the respondents who were the most active in collaborating with other organisations. In most organisations, the coordinator identified one social worker as the most appropriate respondent. In other organisations, the coordinator was involved in collaborating with other service agencies. For this reason, we decided that an additional interview with a coordinator was necessary for these organisations. We conducted 25 interviews in 20 organisations. We interviewed 10 respondents in generalist service organisations and 15 respondents in specialist service agencies. Before starting the fieldwork, we obtained approval to interview the respondents from the board, coordinator or director of every organisation.

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Mason, 1996; Wengraf, 2001). Our topic list first included general information about the respondent (education, gender and work history). We then asked the respondent questions about his or her service organisation. We used this information to determine the extent to which the organisation could be defined as generalist or specialist. An organisation was regarded as specialist when its activities were limited to a specific problem and target group. As stated, generalists were defined as social workers affiliated with service organisations that work with different client cases and focus on the entire range of problems that they experience in different life domains (Blom, 2004). We emphasise that our choices in determining which organisations were defined as specialist and generalist were discussed in a group meeting with different key members of the network.

Furthermore, we sought information about the experiences of social workers affiliated with both generalist and specialist service organisations in terms of how they collaborated with one another. We requested that our respondents illustrate their answers with examples and illustrations from actual cases. This strategy allowed the researcher to focus on the actual experience of respondents from specialist and generalist service organisations. The respondents were explicitly informed that their answers were confidential; this was done both to prevent them from giving socially desirable answers and to protect their privacy.

In the next step, we analysed and coded the interview transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We began the coding process immediately after concluding the first interview. This approach allowed us to uncover findings at an early stage and to verify our results while analysing the data generated through subsequent interviews. The results of this coding process show that generalists fulfil two critical functions in the network, as presented in the following paragraph.

Results

We discuss the main results of our study. We start with a description of the generalist and specialist service organisations in the network. We then elaborate on the role of generalists in a network of specialist service agencies.

Generalist and specialist service providers in the network

Table 2 presents the generalist service organisations in our analysis. We follow Perlinski et al. (2010) and Blom (2004) in distinguishing between generalist and specialist service organisations. In generalist organisations, social workers work with all types of clients and problems. They aim to help their clients address their multiple problems. The community house provides all types of leisure activities for the neighbourhood. Additionally, social workers listen to the ‘stories’ of their clients to unravel their complex situations and determine how these complex problems ‘are interrelated’. The social workers guide people experiencing multiple problems towards the appropriate specialised service organisations. Furthermore, we conducted interviews in generalist health care centres. In these centres, a social worker organises consultation hours during which district residents can discuss any questions or problems with the social workers. The social workers aim to gauge the clients’ various problems and guide them to the relevant specialist service providers. Another example is M., a service organisation whose social workers focus on clients experiencing ‘multiple problems’. The social workers of M. aim to empower their clients by enabling them to eventually address their own problems. Finally, in this district we also find two one-stop shops that can be considered generalist service providers (Røysum, 2013). In these organisations, the social workers aim to help their clients with all of their problems.

Insert Table 2

In Table 3, we present the specialist service organisations considered in our analysis. First, we selected public centres of social welfare, that provide both financial and material services. Such centres' social workers aim to investigate the extent to which clients fulfil the eligibility criteria for receiving benefits from social assistance. These centres also aim to help social assistance clients find jobs (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013). Furthermore, home care services are considered specialist service organisations that provide cleaning services to the elderly and families in need. Additionally, social workers working for labour unions, social housing companies and medical care centres are considered specialists because they focus on one type of problem in their respective domains of administrative support for the unemployed, the provision of quality housing or the provision of medical aid. Social workers who work in a volunteer-services capacity coordinate volunteers who visit isolated and lonely families and the elderly. In the paragraph below, we focus on how specialists collaborate with generalist service providers.

Insert Table 3

The role of generalists in a network

Our primary finding is that generalists fulfil a crucial role in the network by facilitating the interaction between specialists and their clients with complex needs. First, we show that generalists fulfil a **broker** role. Generalists provide information about the client's context and by doing so, they allow specialists to adapt their services to their clients' specific needs. Second, our interviews also found that generalists fulfil a **mediating** role. More specifically, generalists can resolve the disputes and conflicts that arise between a client and a specialist social worker. In the following paragraphs, we elaborate on these two critical roles of generalists within a network of service organisations.

Brokering information

The respondents affiliated with specialist service agencies emphasised the need for information about their clients' problems in various life domains. These respondents emphasised the importance of information about the client's '*context*'. In their view, '*context*' refers to the client's problems in various life domains, such as a lack of quality housing, family issues, addiction problems, a lack of education, unemployment, parental problems or a lack of financial and other material means.

Respondents from specialist organisations stated that they need to know the client's context to adapt their services to the specific needs of the client's target group.

Social workers from a specialist employment agency or a public centre of social welfare, for example, need this information so that they can consider their clients' specific needs and wishes when guiding them towards the labour market (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013). Other respondents from specialist service organisations emphasised that this information is critical in determining clients' eligibility. However, our interviews with these specialist respondents show that information about the clients' context is difficult to obtain. Clients often have difficulty explaining their needs to social workers. Some clients are afraid; others have difficulty understanding every aspect of their complex situation. In most cases, specialist social workers indicated that they do not have sufficient time to consider every detail of clients' context. We confirm the findings of Kuosmanen and Starke (2013), who state that specialists lack information that falls outside their area of expertise (Blom, 2004; Rose, 2011). For these reasons, specialists indicated the need to collaborate with generalist social workers.

All of our respondents affiliated with specialist service organisations acknowledged that generalists can gain a complete, very profound holistic view of their clients. This knowledge is considered a 'crucial asset' or a 'crucial resource' of generalist service providers in the network (Ellem et al., 2012; Rose, 2011). Generalists such as the social workers of M., the community centre or the health care agencies make great efforts to gain knowledge of the complexity of problems that clients experience in a variety of life domains. Below, one of our specialist respondents addresses this issue:

‘Those social workers from X (name of generalist organisation), they come here with their clients, and that feels very comfortable. I sometimes have to talk a lot about rules and criteria that clients have to keep in mind. And the social worker of X is able to translate this information to X’s clients. They know how to tell things to their clients, and they know how to translate their difficult situation to me, so I like it very much that they come here and sit at my desk with their client.’ (Social worker A affiliated with specialist service organisation)

Specialists such as the above respondent often assess the value of generalists in terms of their efficiency. As previously stated, many of our respondents have clients who struggle to tell their life stories in a clear and structured way. When a generalist accompanies the client, specialists are able to gain very relevant and structured information. Generalists are able to communicate the specific details of the client’s complex situation in a very comprehensible way.

These findings were confirmed by our respondents affiliated with generalist service organisations. These professionals emphasised that they expend great effort getting to know clients and their complex situations. Below, one of our generalist respondents provides a good example of how he/she plays a facilitating broker role with respect to specialist service providers. A respondent from M. (a generalist service organisation) explains how a client needed financial assistance from the local Public Centre of Social

Welfare (PCSW). However, the client did not know how to explain her difficult situation to the social worker at the PCSW, who needed this information to verify the eligibility of the client. The respondent from M. confirms this finding:

‘Yes, for example, a woman that needed financial assistance. The income of the man is too low. The man, however, is addicted to every type of drug he can find. And then you know that the woman needs some assistance. I know the specific problems of her husband and their family and know how bad the woman needs to get a job, not only for the money but also to get out of the problematic context of her household. The client, however, is ashamed, and I explain her situation to the social worker at the PCSW. The social workers at the PCSW know me and got a lot of information, and they are happy with it.’ (Social worker A affiliated with generalist service organisation.)

We find that generalists can play a facilitating role in the network by brokering crucial information from the client to the specialist service providers. Generalists provide information about their clients’ complex problems and by doing so, they facilitate the interaction between specialists and clients.

Mediating

Generalists not only fulfil a brokering role but also mediate when conflicts arise.

We show that a generalist’s comprehensive view of his or her client’s situation is

decisive when mediating between specialist service organisations and clients.

Conflicts often arise when social workers affiliated with specialist service organisations encounter clients exhibiting difficult behaviour such as aggression or extreme withdrawal. Because of their comprehensive and holistic view, generalists are capable of relating their clients' violent reactions to their complex and vulnerable circumstances or context. By communicating this to specialist service organisations, they obtain critical information and are better able to address clients exhibiting difficult behaviour. One respondent affiliated with a specialist service organisation explains this finding as follows:

'Yes, for example, I had a client that was very aggressive. This woman drank a lot, and when she was drunk, she acted very aggressively. And sometimes, you don't have to be scared, but you are. And then X (name of social worker from generalist organisation) came here and told me why this woman is so violent and why she acts the way she does. Because of this, because X was here... I mean, that is a good thing because now I understand her (the client's) situation, and I know that I don't have to take her violent behaviour very personally.' (Social worker B affiliated with specialist service organisation)

The generalist in this case provided the following explanation:

'Yes, sometimes the violent behaviour of some clients can be very frightening. Clients shout and sometimes break things in your office. However, if you know

why these clients act aggressively, you can cope with this in a good way.

Sometimes, we have to talk with other social workers, often from the public centres of social welfare or from social housing companies or parental support services; they do not have a broad perspective. We explain why some clients act badly; we explain their situation and then, they understand.’ (Social worker C affiliated with generalist service agency)

The mediating role of generalists is also highlighted when clients are refused necessary services. In some cases, specialist social workers argue that clients initially do not meet the eligibility criteria to receive services such as social housing or financial support. In certain cases, however, generalists are familiar with the specific details of their client’s situation and convince specialist service providers to reconsider their initial negative decision. Often, respondents from generalist service organisations have crucial information that can support a client’s eligibility. An example provided by many of our respondents relates to social housing companies’ eligibility criteria. In one of our interviews, a conflict arose between a social housing company and a client who was refused access to quality social housing. The respondent from a generalist service organisation, however, was able to provide good arguments in favour of the client’s eligibility. Ultimately, the social housing company revised its decision.

Generalists also mediate when clients feel frustrated with the complexity of eligibility criteria and difficult administrative requirements. Generalist and specialist

respondents often state that clients feel frustrated when confronted with difficult administrative tasks in submitting their applications to receive essential services. In the following example, a respondent from a generalist service organisation explained to a young client why social workers at public centres of social welfare '*behave the way they do*'. He also provided the client with some 'tips and tricks'.

'For example, in the case of young clients, when they do not get what they want, they often get very frustrated; they get angry and have no patience. Sometimes, they have to complete some small administrative tasks, but they refuse to do this. In that case, officials from, for example, the public centres must refuse their application. In these cases, we have to explain this to the client. We have to cope with their frustrations and explain why the centres of social welfare respond in such a way. That can be very difficult.' (Social worker E affiliated with generalist service organisation)

These examples show that generalists can play a facilitating role by mediating between clients and specialist service organisations when conflicts lead to frustrations for both clients and specialist social workers. We found that this mediating role manifests not only when the generalist explains client's behaviour to the specialist social worker but also when the specific rules or regulations of service organisations are communicated to the client.

Limitations

This article embraces the role of networks that combine the strengths of specialist and generalist service organisations (Blom, 2004; Ellem et al., 2012; Kuosmanen & Starke, 2013). Our analysis provides scientific insights into the value of generalist service providers in a network of specialist service organisations.

Nevertheless, three limitations must be addressed in future scientific research on the critical role of generalist service organisations. First, we emphasise that our contribution lacks the client's perspective. We assume that a network that combines generalists and specialists can integrate specialist knowledge with the facilitating role of generalists and that positive effects may emerge at the client level. Provan and Milward (1995) argue that the effectiveness of a network must be assessed by considering the extent to which it contributes to reducing a client's problems and improving his or her well-being. We therefore argue that our findings must be confirmed by research that considers the client's perspective.

Second, we focused on organisations in the centre of the network. However, Rogers (2003) and Burt (2004) emphasise that actors situated in the peripheral parts of a network can also perform critical functions. We therefore note that our focus on the core of the network could be broadened to include more peripheral network regions, thus showing that generalists can also play critical roles in connecting other non-central regions of the network.

Third, because our analysis is conducted at the service-organisation level, our findings seem to imply that all social workers in specialist service agencies must be considered specialists and that all social workers in generalist service agencies have a holistic perspective on clients' problems. In this article, we did not focus on this issue. For example, in one generalist service organisation, some social workers may have had a broader focus on all life domains than others. In this article, we followed earlier research on service networks that used information from a limited number of social workers and coordinators to analyse collaboration at the organisational level. Thus, we did not have information about variations that could exist among social workers within a single service organisation. We suggest that future research focuses on the degree of variation among social workers in a specialist or generalist organisation and the extent to which this variation could affect collaboration with other organisations in the network.

Conclusion

Whereas some authors argue that specialisation has advantages, others emphasise that an extensive degree of specialisation has detrimental effects at the client level (Blom, 2004; Ellem et al., 2012; Perlinski et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2006). Other authors argue that generalists are better suited to provide services to clients with very complex problems on different life domains. We agree with Blom (2004) that it is

difficult to argue in favour of one type of service organisation over another. The findings of our qualitative analysis contribute to a better understanding of the role of generalist service organisations. We recognise that the role of generalists can be considered problematic when they collaborate with specialist service agencies. This qualitative study has explored how social workers in specialist service organisations perceive collaboration with social workers from generalist service agencies. We investigated a district in Antwerp in which service organisations are confronted with vulnerable target groups. Our qualitative analysis shows that generalists can facilitate interactions between clients and specialist service organisations. We agree with Wholey and Huonker (1993) that generalist service agencies can play a crucial role as the linking-pin or broker in a network. In this article, we show that this crucial role is seen in the generalist's ability to mediate conflicts and to broker information between clients and specialist social workers. First, generalists fulfil a crucial role when brokering information from the client to his or her specialist social worker. Generalists have a comprehensive view of their clients' problems and can provide information on the clients' context in a very efficient and structured way. The respondents affiliated with specialist service organisations in this study often emphasised the value of this type of information in terms of efficiency. Second, generalists fulfil a mediating role when conflicts arise between specialists and their clients. Generalists can explain a client's difficult behaviour to specialist social workers and translate the specific contexts of

administrative requirements and eligibility criteria to the client.

This article and its findings about the value of generalist practise in a network of specialist services contributes to further understanding of how social work can provide an answer to the complex problems of very vulnerable target groups. Further research on the importance of collaboration, networks and generalist practise – using both qualitative and quantitative network analysis – is therefore necessary to develop this research agenda.

Ethical approval

No ethical approval was required for this research. No clients were interviewed. All of the respondents were explicitly informed that their answers were confidential.

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