From struggles to resource gains in interprofessional service networks:

Key findings from a multiple case study

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Abstract

In interprofessional service networks, employees cross professional boundaries to collaborate with colleagues and clients with expertise and values different from their own. It can be a struggle to adopt shared work practices and deal with 'multivoicedness'. At the same time, networks allow members to engage in meaningful service provision, gain a broader understanding of the service provided, and obtain social support. Intertwined network struggles and resource gains have received limited attention in the interprofessional care literature to date. The aim of the study was to investigate the learning potential of the co-existing struggles and resource gains. This paper reports findings from two interprofessional networks. Interviews were conducted with 19 employees and thematically analyzed. Three types of struggles and six types of resource gains of networking were identified. The struggles relate, firstly, to the assumptions of networking following similar practices to those in a home organization; secondly, to the challenges of dealing with the multivoicedness of networking; and, thirdly, to the experienced gap between the networking ideals and the reality of cooperation. At the same time, the network members experience gains in emotional resources (e.g., stronger sense of meaningfulness at work), cognitive resources (e.g., understanding the customer needs from alternative perspectives), and social resources (e.g., being able to rely on other professionals' competence). Learning potential emerged from the dynamics between coexisting struggles and resource gains.

Introduction

Networks that cross professional and organizational boundaries have emerged as an important organizational form of the postindustrial era (Powell, 1990; Provan & Milward, 2001). Organizations build networks in order to deal with complex problems (Chisholm, 1996), to produce goods and services (Beeby & Booth, 2000), and to create shared knowledge and capabilities (Hartley & Allison, 2002). For individual employees, interprofessional interactions in networks offer ever more complex positions (Edwards & Nicoll, 2004), as they have to cross traditional operational boundaries (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher, & Ludvigsen, 2010) and collaborate with people whose backgrounds, competencies, attitudes, and values are different from their own (Baxter & Brumfitt, 2008; Guile, 2011; Hall, 2005; Norris et al., 2005; Visse, Widdershoven, & Abma, 2012). Professionals may experience such collaborations as straining and overwhelming but also as stimulating and empowering. In other words, networks entail both struggles, as network members have to invest their resources to overcome networking challenges, and resource gains, as networks grant their members new insights and social connections. The aim of the present study is to analyze both the struggles and resource gains experienced by network members.

There is a need to further develop a theoretical understanding of professional learning in networks (Appleby & Hillier, 2012; Barnett, Hoang, Cross, & Bridgman, 2015; Guile 2011). We respond to this call by providing insights on how the co-existence of struggles and resource gains can foster interprofessional and inter-organizational learning. Two interprofessional service networks were selected for analysis as part of a larger study (Seppänen & Toiviainen, 2017). One network provided services for divorcing families, and the other for supervised probationary freedom.

Conceptual framework

Interprofessional Service Networks

Service networks are multi-organizational and interprofessional collaborations producing services needed by clients. The shared goal of providing service to clients connects network members and

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provides both meaning and structure to network collaboration (Edwards, 2010). However, service networks can exist without direct exchange and resource dependency between network members – the properties emphasized, for instance, in the business network research (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). In comparison with interprofessional teamwork characterized by high levels of interdependence, integration and shared responsibility, interprofessional network activities are broader in scope and more loosely interconnected (Reeves et al., 2010). Taking an example from one of our case organizations, a family therapist works relatively independently with a divorcing couple and may only occasionally discuss the details of the divorce process with the lawyer who is drafting the divorce settlement for the same family.

Networking Struggles

Problems in interprofessional networking often relate to the difficulty of collaborating in a heterogeneous group in which the goals and priorities are understood in multiple ways (Baxter & Brumfitt, 2008; Guile, 2011; Visse, Widdershoven, & Abma, 2012). Participants face the challenge of moving beyond their own expertise to get the work done in the network; they need to adopt a shared vision of service provision rather than only focus on their part of it, and to adjust their actions to those of other network members (Baxter & Brumfitt, 2008; Edwards, 2010; Kvarnström, 2008; Seppänen & Toiviainen, 2017). We use a concept 'struggle' to emphasize employees' substantial investments of emotional, cognitive, and social resources to overcome the problems and adversities of networking.

Networking struggles, however, also can spur participants to widen their professional perspectives and may trigger expansive learning resulting in a deeper and more complex understanding of clients and services (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Because of this learning potential the notion of struggle can be extended beyond conflicts of interest at the workplace (Schied, 2001). Struggles typically reflect wider change pressures in the society shared by employees, managers, and other stakeholders in service production (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

Resource Gains at Work

When working, people use and produce different kinds of resources. Some resources relate to employees' social and material work environments (such as social support), while working also involves their psychological, cognitive, and emotional resources such as, respectively, positive self-image, work-related knowledge, and emotional vitality. Workers use these various resources to reach the goals of their work and, while working, resources may become depleted or grow (Hobfoll, 2002).

Much attention has been traditionally invested in understanding the depletion of psychological, cognitive, and emotional resources at work, such as in the case of stress and burnout (Bakker & Derks, 2010). We, on the other hand, build on the insight from the adversarial growth theory indicating that struggling with adversarial experiences may initially tax people's resources, but can eventually also result in resource gains (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This happens in interprofessional networks when they challenge members' usual assumptions of their work and services. When struggling to overcome these challenged assumptions and composing new systems of meaning, people can learn and their personal resources can grow. For instance, employees' professional knowledge and experience can expand through struggles with new work realities, while they also can develop more positive and efficacious worker identities (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007).

Learning Potential

The learning potential of work has been defined as learning opportunities afforded to employees at a workplace (Billett, 2001; Poell, Van Dam, & Van den Berg, 2004; Hallqvist & Hydén, 2013; Nikolova, Van Ruysseveldt, De Witte, & Syroit, 2014). Previous research has searched for learning potential in job transitions, experimentation and reflection, and interaction processes at work (Tynjälä, 2013), while early observations from the case studies directed our attention to learning potential that resides in networking struggles that, over time, may evolve into resource gains. Such evolution-based learning potential has been suggested in the strategic alliances research with its insights into the evolution of cooperative relationships as the process of learning. As Doz (1996, p. 55) summarized: "Successful

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alliance projects were highly evolutionary and went through a sequence of interactive cycles of learning, reevaluation and readjustment". Compared with strategic business networks, service networks are much more emergent in their nature but there is need to investigate the evolutionary learning experienced.

Methods

We employed a multiple case study design (Yin, 1984) to address the following research questions: (1) what kinds of networking struggles do employees experience in service networks? (2) What kinds of resource gains do employees experience in service networks? (3) What kind of learning potential does the co-existence of networking struggles and resources gains generate?

Cases

The two networks analyzed in this paper took part in a large research project carried out in 2011-2013. In the project, five interprofessional networks from social and industrial services collaborated with scholars from three research institutes with the goal of studying and developing the network practices and sustainable well-being of employees (Seppänen & Toiviainen, 2017). The present study focuses on two of the five networks representing different fields of services in social care.

The first case, which we call *Probation,* includes the networks formed for supervised probationary freedom (SPF) at the Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency. SPF is an option for the last six months of a prisoner's sentence. The prisoner resides outside the prison to build crime-free life with the help of an interprofessional service network coordinated by a criminal sanctions supervisor who, on the basis of the unique circumstances of each prisoner, invites others to the network. Some members come from the Criminal Sanctions Agency (e.g., prison guards), while others represent public and private organizations providing housing, work, or education to the prisoner, or counseling with mental problems and/or substance abuse. During the time of our study, the network members typically operated rather independently on the basis of their particular professional backgrounds.

In our second case, *Divorce,* professionals from three units in the Social Services Department of a municipality form service networks to help divorcing families to find solutions to divorce-related problems and conflicts, and to deal with the formal procedures relating to a divorce. The employees from the Family Counselling office bring to the networks their competence to help families with child development and upbringing questions, and to support families with problematic situations and crises. The competence from the Child Welfare Social Work Unit is needed when the safety and health of children are at risk, and the Family Law Matters Unit works with the divorcing parents to make legal documents stipulating, for example, child custody. The desire to build networks grew from the realization that many clients worked with several or all of the units without the units coordinating services. This resulted in unnecessarily complicated service processes with clients moving between the units.

These two kinds of networks offer different kinds of social services. In addition, the members of the *Divorce* network belonged to the same organization but had different professional backgrounds while, in the case of *Probation*, the members represented both different organizations and professions.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted with the members of the service networks. Interview questions were: How has networking changed your work? Are the network's working practices meaningful and easy to carry out? Do you face situations in which networking is difficult and not easy to carry out? Does your workplace (its management) support or constrain networking? All interviews were recorded, verbatim transcribed, and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes.

Participants. In the *Probation* case, the ten interviewees represented various professions and worked in or outside the criminal sanctions agency. Participants included criminal sanctions supervisors, social workers, prison guards, special experts, and probation officers. The interviewees were between 27 and 57 years old and held various occupational and university degrees. They had been working in their fields between five and 35 years. In the *Divorce* case, nine employees were interviewed, each working for one of the three units in the family services. The interviewees were between 43 and 53 years old, and

most had a university degree in social work or law. They had been working in the field for between 15 and 29 years.

Data Analysis

        The interview transcripts were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by applying a cooperative procedure. The first author identified the discursive excerpts expressing the struggles in the informants' accounts, while the second author identified the resource-gains excerpts. After the extraction of all relevant excerpts, we discussed their meaning and organized all distinguished struggles and resource gains into thematic groups.

        The analysis of learning potential followed. We selected those excerpts in which an informant expressed a struggle closely intertwined with a resource gain. We interpreted that there was learning involved, not as a planned process to solve the struggles, but as an evolutionary by-product of struggling at work. We characterized this as *evolution-based learning potential*.

Findings

Struggles in Service Networks

        The informants' descriptions of networking struggles manifested themselves as dilemmatic reflections on alternative or unclear courses of action or as criticism against networking. The informants described three types of struggles.

        Struggle 1: Benchmarking networking to intra-organizational practices (S1). The employees struggled with networking when they compared the operations of the networks with their intra-organizational work. The discursive style was declaratory and descriptive, rather than reflective (e.g., "the fact is…" and "our resources simply don't allow…"). Employees assumed that the network's activities and collaboration would follow the same principles as in the home organization. Networking efforts meant an extra workload that competed with the accomplishment of the "basic task" of their home

organization. In the following interview quotation, the informant prefers the small-group work to the network, as the following participant noted:

> *"*It's quite hard, just that there are so many people there (…), it's much easier or comfortable to meet with the client alone or with your colleague, in a smaller group" (*Divorce 7*).

Struggle 2: Facing and dealing with the multivoicedness of networking (S2). The employees encountered and had to deal with multivoicedness. The discursive indication was that the informants cited their network partners (sometimes verbatim) ("I said…but they remarked…"). Even though negotiations, debates, and even disagreements of different kinds belong to a normal course of service work, the informants found it challenging to deal with the multivoicedness in interprofessional networks. The more employees became involved in networking, the more they started to struggle with the multivoicedness they faced at the professional and cultural boundaries. In the following excerpt, a criminal sanctions supervisor describes debates with municipal workers and potential employers who have their own understandings of prisoners and the services to be provided – understandings obviously different from the supervisor's own:

> "I got a flat refusal from them [municipal workers] – 'Take care of your prisoners' – even though it says in the law that, during probationary freedom, a prisoner is eligible to normal benefits [--]" (Probation 2).

Struggle 3: Experiencing and seeking to bridge a real-ideal gap in networking (S3). The employees experienced and tried to bridge a real-ideal gap of networking. In this discourse, the informants typically spoke in the conditional tense and explicated and analyzed the need for change ("we should send experienced workers…" and "that everybody would see networking as a tool…"). As the informants had accumulated experiences of networks, they realized the discrepancy between the reality of networking and the ideal of what networks could at best offer. They reflected on the possibility of more advanced networked activities. First, the employees had expectations and requirements that were not quite fulfilled in practice, such as having consistent guidelines:

"When organizations have extremely different guidelines for cooperation and networking, it creates imbalance and conflict, it would require that all parties saw it as a tool… [admitting] that of course we build networks with the clients" (*Divorce 2*).

Secondly, the employees criticized inertia in their home organizations and saw it hindering networking in many ways. For instance, their home organization could avoid networking on the pretext that network meetings were difficult to organize:

"…when planning some network meetings and who should be invited, [we end up thinking], but this [partner] won't make it, this one won't want to come, and this one doesn't have time. So let's do it by ourselves. Such an old-fashioned mindset that has always existed here: since we haven't networked [before], why should we really start now?" (Probation 7).

Thirdly, the employees reflected on the possibility of removing obstacles and finding new networking practices. In the following excerpt, an informant ponders on differences in the network members' working conditions leading to differences in the members' networking opportunities:

"…there are members whose work is so [tightly] scheduled that they clearly don't have any slack. Others' work is of a different nature…so these kinds of constraints or hindrances can exist. But I don't see any other major obstacles…. Maybe we should have a shared vision, a shared idea of what [the network] is, what it could be, and how it's done" (*Divorce* 8).

Resource Gains in Service Networks

We identified something as a resource when an interviewee indicated that that aspect of networking enabled him/her to reach work goals ("it would be impossible (…) if there was no network…"), to deal with the demands of the job ("they bring their competence and input (…), it's essential…"), or had some intrinsic value ("[networking] gives tremendously strength…") We organized the resource-gain excerpts into six themes (R1-R6) that we further grouped into three broader themes: emotional, cognitive, and social resources.

Emotional resources. The informants gained two kinds of emotional resources from networking. First, networking fostered the sense of meaningfulness among the informants (R1). Second, they had the sense of growing energy and agency by networking (R2).

Resource gain 1: Increased sense of meaningfulness (R1). Several informants emphasized that service networks elevated the significance of their work and, thus, made it more meaningful. This was because networking made it possible to offer more comprehensive and effective services that one's home organization could not offer alone. In the *Probation* case, the prisoner had to plan and organize his/her life outside the prison, and the network members played different roles in helping the prisoner to do this; some helped the prisoner find work, others helped with drug-free living, etc. The employees experienced that, through networks, they could truly help prisoners and, by reducing the risk for recidivism, society as a whole.

> "I think preparing supervised probationary freedom [together with the other network members] is the most sensible work in the prison administration, just because it probably has the strongest influence on preventing backsliding. [Networking is] mostly meaningful: in some sense challenging and even straining, but I feel that it's important work" (*Probation* 3).

Resources gain 2: Energy at work (*R2).* Several informants in the *Probation* and *Divorce* cases stated that knowing how networking made it possible to provide the best possible service to the client gave them the energy to tackle the struggles of networking. Moreover, in both networks, some informants also noted that personal and shared successes in the networks gave them energy. Just because networking was often challenging and caused them some struggle, it felt especially energizing when something went well.

> "It's awesome how we really have different roles, that [even though] we're really not workmates… how we still speak the same language. And we have the courage to join in on what the other is doing. We're really interested in each other's ideas, to hear each other's opinions" (*Divorce* 2).

Cognitive Resources. The data suggested two different kinds of cognitive resources that the network members gained from their network activities. First, networking made it possible to take a broader view of their work and service (resource gain type 3). Second, participation in the network activities offered opportunities to learn about networking and how to operate as a network member (R4).

Resource gain 3: Broadening views (R3). The informants in the *Divorce* case emphasized that networking made accessible information that was not available in their home organization. In the *Probation* case, the informants reported that they learned to see their work as a part of a greater whole and understand how even their mundane tasks could result in something important for another network member. One informant reflected:

> "When you network and create your own connections to the others, to the authorities and agents of different sectors, you learn to see your work a little bit from the outside. That's good. That helps me to see a reason for all the paperwork and log-keeping…my work can benefit someone else much more than it benefits me" (*Probation* 7).

The informants in the *Probation* case also found it encouraging to see that others working in totally different contexts had same daily problems as they did and were also stressed by their work. This helped in putting their work-related worries into perspective.

Resource gain 4: Learning to operate in networks (R4). In the *Probation* case particularly, the informants pointed out that they were becoming competent networkers. They learned how to establish a network for the probation process and how to contact the appropriate people.

> "I'd say that the practical networking is the most important lesson to be learned from all this: you cannot…these networks cannot…they don't come as a given, like you'd have a list of [telephone] numbers you could call. Rather, it's created through your own input; you really can't teach this in a training center" (*Probation* 2).

Social Resources. We detected two kinds of social resources. First, the informants described how contributions from the other members supported their work (R5). Second, the informants mentioned how

they gradually learned to know each other, and this generated a sense of familiarity which was an important precondition for a smooth network operation (R6).

Resource gain 5: Relying on others' contributions (R5). In the *Probation* case, the informants emphasized that the other network members were able to handle many issues that the informants would not know how to deal with. The informants did not have to worry about those aspects of the service that the others were taking care of. The networks also supported their members simply by involving more people, which meant that tasks could be divided and responsibilities shared. Having different kinds of network partners, thus, added to the meaningfulness of the work (R1) but also offered psychological safety.

"In our organization, we already work in pairs or teams, so you don't have to go to the daily grind with demanding emotions alone, and now [because of networking] other players are more or less involved in our divorce family cases. Well, that helps me feel that I can cope with them, after all" (*Divorce* 5).

Resource gain 6: Familiarity (R6). Several informants emphasized that being familiar with their partners aided them in networking. It was easier to contact other service providers familiar from earlier client cases. Familiarity also enhanced the informants' confidence in their partners' contributions: knowing the others strengthened their conviction that they would be able to handle their responsibilities and do their part. The informants reasoned that, even if material and personnel resources were tight, networks could still operate when the network members knew each other.

"There are days when I wouldn't have the energy to constantly deal with people and to discuss and ponder on issues. But once you get to know the people and know the contact persons that you communicate with regularly, then it's easier to contact them and reflect on issues" (*Probation* 2).

The informants also said that expectations towards other network members had to be realistic, or the network would constantly run into problems, with some network members expecting others to solve

problems or take on tasks that really did not belong to them. Therefore, networking was both supported and energized by clear goals, roles, and rules generated by the network members themselves.

Learning Potential: From Struggles to Resource Gains

Having analyzed the struggles and resource gains separately, we examined their connections in order to answer our third research question: What kind of learning potential does the co-existence of networking struggles and resources gains generate? We recognized that the informants' accounts of the struggles were sometimes closely connected to resource gains. More precisely, the struggles with multivoicedness and the real-ideal gap could develop into resource gains in an evolutionary way. For example, dealing with multivoicedness demanded considerable effort (S2) but, on the other hand, it also added to the meaningfulness of the work and was accompanied by the positively experienced contributions from other network members (R1 and R5).

The network members also had learned to deal with the misunderstandings and conflicting expectations originating from the network's multivoicedness. Their aim to reconcile the different views was connected with the resource gains of learning to operate in networks (R4) and familiarity (R6).

> *"*And we've talked a lot about this, that they [wrong expectations] should be discussed, but, unfortunately, we don't always remember to do so. [We should] talk about it right from the beginning, whether we have a shared understanding, somehow" (*Divorce* 3).

Similar evolutionary pattern emerged when the network members struggled with the gap between reality and the perceived ideal of networking (S3). While acknowledging the value of alternative views offered by the network partners (R3), this employee struggles with the networking processes burdening the clients.

> "With the help of [network partner expertise], we can offer services not available [from the family counseling office], but it's a challenge to manage the situations [where a client meets with several network members at the same time] such that the respect for the client is there and that the client is not burdened too much" (*Divorce* 6).

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The employees were, therefore, gradually learning to see contradictory voices and perspectives in their networks not only as disagreements, but as equally valid and enriching views of the service provision. They also realized that they could overcome the real-ideal gaps and improve collaboration to better meet the service network's goals.

Discussion

Social work is by its nature complex and multifaceted endeavor and, consequently, it is widely shared view among both researchers and practitioners that it is best carried out in complex service systems bringing together professionals from different fields (e.g., Freeth, 2001; Reeves et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there is still lack of empirical evidence on both the challenges and opportunities in such interprofessional collaboration (Reeves et al., 2010). Our contribution is to analyze both the struggles and resources in interprofessional service networks and connect the two to indicate how – via individual and collective learning – the struggles can turn into resource gains.

The informants described how networking requires effort, and the network members have to struggle to achieve the desired results. For them, networking was not easy – as research on interprofessional teams also has identified (Burn & Edwards, 2007; Kvarnström, 2008; Reeves et al., 2010; Robinson & Cottrell, 2005). Nevertheless, at the same time, they described various resources that networking offers both to them as service providers, and to their clients. For us, these descriptions appeared as critical reflections characterizing adult learning (Mezirow, 1997) offering a meaningful vantage point to study learning in interprofessional service networks. Therefore, we moved beyond observing the struggles and resources separately (cf. Freeth, 2001; Paul & Peterson, 2002; Reeves et al., 2010) and regarded how they exist simultaneously in the daily work of our interprofessional service networks. This allowed us to observe the employees' experiences of struggles and resource gains in a dynamic relationship that created learning potential for interprofessional networks (Hartley & Allison, 2002). Learning can take place when network members jointly reflect on and seek answers to the questions relating to struggles and, thereby, build resources (Hobfoll, 2002) for working more effectively

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in networks while also securing their own personal and professional well-being and growth in the network setting.

Our analysis also revealed a temporal sequence in networking struggles; different types of networking struggles emerge in different developmental phases of networking. Particularly in the early stages of networking, the network members used their *intra*-organizational practices as the benchmark for the networks and, therefore, found networking difficult compared with their habitual practices (S1). Against this backdrop, they at most associated networking with interprofessional cooperation entailing only minimal coordination between service providers. Service networks, however, represent a new learning challenge beyond inter-professional coordination (Edwards, 2010). Keeping to a single organization's practices hinders a network's learning and delimits innovation in the development of complex services.

Once the network members gained more experiences with networking, they faced the complexity of the multiple voices (S2), but also recognized potential resource gains in multivoicedness (Bakhtin, 1981; Akkerman, Admiraal, Simons, & Niessen, 2006) of networking. At this point, they still struggled to create a shared language and rules with the network partners. When accumulating insights in the strengths of networking, the participants realized the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of networking (S3). Experiences of what collaboration at best could offer constructed a vision of good networking but collided with the imperfections of daily practices. This notion facilitated the members to ponder how to develop collaboration.

When it comes to the resource gains in interprofessional networks, we especially want to draw attention to the sense of meaningfulness. Literature (e.g., Freeth, 2001; Paul & Peterson, 2002) has recognized several benefits from and encouragement to engage in interprofessional collaboration, and our analysis emphasizes the importance of meaningfulness as the key motivator of the networking professionals. Our informants indicated that because they perceived interprofessional networking as a meaningful way to provide high-quality service that best responds to the clients' needs, they also were motivated to endure and engage in the struggles of, for instance, multivoicedness. The practical

implication is that the network members need to be able to see and remain aware how the network is able to benefit the clients; this sustains their motivation for the challenging way of working.

The findings on evolutionary learning potential prompt us to consider whether all kinds of struggles could turn into resource gains, and we consequently suggest the idea of intervention-based learning potential to harness this possibility. This means that employees' simultaneous reflections on their networking struggles and resource gains can be supported with learning interventions (Engeström, Sannino, & Virkkunen, 2014; Kerosuo & Engeström, 2003). Learning potential has practical implications for the design of network development workshops and meetings. Understanding the evolving struggles may assist network members and coordinators to have the foresight to start creating local solutions early.

We offer two examples of how we have made use of the learning potential of struggles in the workshops organized with interprofessional networks. The first example is to formulate questions that address the challenges in different phases of the network's development. Possible questions for discussion are:

- Early development phase: Do we find networking difficult because we are so committed to the practices of our home organizations and expect them to function in networks as well? Is it possible to develop new practices for mutual boundary crossing?

- Middle development phase: Do we recognize and listen to the various professional voices involved in the network? In what way can various voices help us understand our client better and how can we take the full benefit from the different professional perspectives available?

- Later development phase: How would our network operate at its best? What are the biggest obstacles and bottlenecks to work towards this ideal? What are the good solutions we already have developed and how could these be stabilized and disseminated in the network?

Another option is to introduce the three types of struggles to participants and encourage reflection in multiprofessional, multiorganizational groups by asking: Based on your experiences in service-provision work, do you recognize these struggles? How do the struggles manifest themselves in practice?

How have you resolved the struggles, what kind of networking practices have emerged that you may share with your colleagues in this workshop?

This study has a number of limitations relating to its nature as a spatially and temporally bounded multiple case study. Our findings are from interviews only, gathered in two unique service networks operating in a certain cultural-historical context. However, the interviews were part of a project during which we also made systematic observations on daily network collaborations giving us pre-understanding for this analysis (Seppänen & Toiviainen, 2017). Service networks also are subject to frequent and rapid changes. We collected our data in 2011, and the struggles and resource gains detected are specific for that time. Despite these spatial and temporal boundary conditions (Bacharach, 1989), we think that the challenges analyzed do carry wider significance and our findings have transferability beyond these cases. Leaning on the notions of the extant network literature and our own research insights in today's professional work life and networking (e.g., Toiviainen, 2003), we propose that insights on, first, the co-existing struggles and resource gains and, second, the learning potential of the networking struggles evolving into resource gains, are worthy of application and exploration in other service networks. This may contribute to committed, long-term network learning processes for improved services that meet clients' complex life situations. We also encourage further studies to replicate our findings and test our suggestions in other contexts for the achievement of a more general understanding of learning potential in interprofessional service networks.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of interest

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