When Collaboration Becomes a Struggle

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Purpose:
In this study a collaboration project in Swedish youth care is analysed. The aim of the project was to enhance coordination between the Social Services and the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care in order to make the efforts more efficient. The project also employed a number of coordinators. The overall purpose of this study is to analyse conflicts, alliances and comparisons identifiable in interviews and observations. The analytic findings are put into an overall “collaboration context” represented by earlier research on the social phenomenon of “collaboration”. In this way the study tries to contribute to a sociological understanding of a contemporary widespread phenomenon.

Design/Methods/Approach:
The empirical materials of the study consist of recorded conversational interviews with 147 project participants (youngsters, parents and various professional categories) as well as observations of meetings, informal get-togethers and visits to institutions, Social Services offices, the head office of the National Board of Institutional Care and coordinators. The material was analysed using the analytic perspectives of Georg Simmel (1950/1964), Theodore Caplow (1968) and Erving Goffman (1959/2004).

Findings:
The analysis shows that the project manifested and led to struggles between organizations involving representatives from the Social Services, the National Board of Institutional Care and the project, as well as to several interpersonal conflicts between representatives from various categories of involved professionals, and the youngsters and their parents. The study also shows that the client, in such human service organizations, faces a significant risk of being marginalized. Professionals who appreciated the collaboration often drew their conclusions based on their interaction with other professionals, but the collaboration did not guarantee a successful treatment of the client.
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Conflicts concerning the roles of the coordinators and their written documents ("the agreements") emerged and were actualized through the creation of the project. The coordinators and their "agreements" can be seen as the project’s most visible representatives and symbols, which during the project become both themes for conflict and actualize already established conflict patterns.

The youngsters and their parents appreciated the projects’ coordinators who appeared as personally involved and able to make concrete changes. However, many of youngsters and their parents criticized the coordinators and even portrayed a victim identity in relation to the project. The coordinators’ relationship with the youngsters and their parents was mostly characterized by passivity. This is clearly apparent in the analysis of the administrative and/or passive coordinator. Different alliance constellations became visible in these presentations. When the coordinator roles were altered in the description, the alliance constellations change.

It is a common strategy for clients in human service organizations to try to enter into alliances with professionals involved in their cases and, in so doing, try to alter the situation to their own advantage. The fact that these alliances are often sought by the client indicates, among other things, the client’s will to fight against the situation in which he/she finds him/herself. I believe that this can be seen as something productive rather than problematic.

**Keywords:**
co-ordination; document; youngster; project; coordinator; triad; role; struggle; collaboration; alliance; conflict; sociology; conflict point of interest; team; dyad
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Goran Basic is a lecturer in sociology at the Department of Sociology, Lund University. His research concerns fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he has written articles on the post-war society and carried out an evaluation of a project in the juvenile care. Basic’s dissertation "When collaboration becomes a struggle. A sociological analysis of a project in the Swedish juvenile care” is based on ethnographic material. Basic is currently analyzing the collaboration between border police and coastguard in the countries of Baltic region.

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