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Helping or Controlling? Choice of Coping Methods When Dealing with Violent Clients in Statutory Social Work

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Abstract: Client violence in social work is a workplace problem in Sweden and internationally. Frontline workers in public agencies have the discretion to decide how they deal with clients to cope with challenges like violence and threats. The coping methods may favour some clients while disadvantaging others. Ultimately, the coping practices may become de facto policy, which may not match official organisational policy. This article explores coping methods statutory social workers use to manage violence and threats in their day-to-day dyadic interactions with clients. The article is based on qualitative interviews with social workers ($n = 19$) who, according to their perception, were victims of client violence. Theory on street-level bureaucracy and frontline workers' discretion is used. Based on thematic analysis, the results show that social workers draw from four groups of coping methods depending on their moral and normative dispositions. These include (1) the forced helper, (2) the compassionate helper, (3) the distanced helper, and (4) the authoritarian helper. Social workers oscillate between different dispositions depending on situational needs, striving to find the appropriate balance between helping and controlling clients. Studying social workers' day-to-day dyadic interactions with clients highlights how coping methods could shape social work policy and practice.

Keywords: workplace violence; client violence; social work; social services; frontline work; coping; street-level bureaucracy; discretion



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1. Introduction

Client violence in statutory social work is a workplace concern worldwide (Heiskanen 2007; Koritsas et al. 2010; Littlechild et al. 2016; Macdonald and Sirotich 2005; Novus 2017; Radey and Wilke 2018; The Swedish Work Environment Authority 2018; Zelnick et al. 2013). In this article, we conceptualise client violence as intentional threats and assaults towards social workers or their family members perpetrated by service users within or related to the context of service provision (Munobwa et al. 2021b). Client violence takes many forms, including physical assault, vandalism of property, verbal threats or assault, self-harm, stalking, and threats to harm social workers' family members (Munobwa et al. 2021b; Waddington et al. 2015). Additionally, there is increasing awareness and concern over cyberbullying, i.e., violence and threats manifested through digital information and communication technologies (Alfandari 2019; Kagan et al. 2018). Cyberbullying is often intended to threaten, hurt or embarrass the victim; cyberbullying can be perpetrated through instant messaging, text messaging, e-mail and social media networks (Watling and Rogers 2012). Cyberbullying is complicated because perpetrators can be anonymous and unmonitored, complicating prevention.

Most violent encounters in social work are non-physical and are sometimes insidious, yet they can have far-reaching effects on the victims (Bowie 2012; Waddington et al. 2005). Psychological distress, including secondary traumatic stress, is thus a common consequence of client violence (Enosh et al. 2013; Littlechild 2005; Littlechild et al. 2016; Padyab et al. 2012; Lev et al. 2022). However, the effects of client violence are multifaceted, covering aspects of

social workers' professional and private life. For example, experiencing client violence is associated with low job satisfaction (Kagan 2021), organisational commitment (Kwon and Kim 2018), fear of contact with clients (Lamothe et al. 2018), and the intention to quit the workplace (Tham 2007). Among social worker students, the experience of client violence is associated with increased fear of future violence (Criss 2009, 2010). Client violence can thus potentially affect recruitment and retention in social work practice.

Statutory social work combines elements of help and control, and social workers have considerable decision-making power. The practice involves the exercise of authority and sometimes infringement on clients' private life (Littlechild 2005; Skau 2018; Smith 2008). In Sweden, individual and family social services are provided by self-governed municipalities with guidance from the National Board of Health and Welfare (Government Offices of Sweden 2005). Through their social services committees, the municipalities have authority to decide on most, but not all, services related to individual and family care. Decision-making authority is delegated to workers within the social services stepwise downwards up to the frontline workers. Social work ethics emphasise clients' self-determination, yet involuntary clients typically characterise practice. Many clients do not freely enter the service relationship with social service agencies; this culminates in distrust and hostile relationships (Ferguson et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2012).

Public service delivery, especially in western countries with some form of public welfare regime, has evolved towards smarketisation and managerialism, a direction generally called New Public Management (NPM). Under NPM, public services are run on business-like models with the aim of effectivising the services (Lindberg et al. 2015). Statutory social work in Sweden, several European countries, and the U.S., for example, is characterised by proceduralised controls and new (often) administrative tasks (Blom 1998; Ellis 2014; Rosa and Almeida 2020; Timor-Shlevin and Benjamin 2021). Social workers' contact with clients has become superficial (Lauri 2016). Flexibility for social workers to adjust to clients' unique life situations is limited, and there are tensions over assessment procedures and what services clients can access. One consequence is that social workers strive "to do things right, rather than doing the right thing" (Lauri 2016, p. 218). Despite this gloomy picture, some scholars suggest that managerialism does not imply that managers and other organisational mechanisms ultimately control frontline work. Frontline workers maintain a reasonable degree of freedom and discretion while dealing with service users; they have space to adjust to situational demands (Ellis 2014; Evans 2013; Lipsky 2010). Discretion does not mean the absence of rules or regulations; instead, it is the flexibility that the rules provide, for example, in ways that enable alternative interpretation of laws and procedures related to service delivery (Evans and Harris 2004; Lipsky 2010). The dilemmas of NPM, managerialism and professional discretion mentioned above are not directly applicable in social work practice within alternative social service regimes. For example, in regimes where non-governmental organisations, community groups or family relationships are the primary source of welfare support, there is limited formal state responsibility; thus, the interaction between the state and its citizens is different (Alcock and Craig 2009).

Generally, statutory social workers operate under strained circumstances with inadequate resources, high workloads, ambiguous or conflicting policy goals, and a limited human resource orientation within their agencies (Tham and Meagher 2009; The Swedish Work Environment Authority 2018; Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa 2021). They exercise discretion to adapt their day-to-day dyadic interactions with clients, and to cope with situational demands, sometimes in ways that negatively affect service quality (Astvik et al. 2014; Lipsky 2010; Zacka 2017). Social workers, therefore, encounter frustrated clients in interactions characterised by mistrust and friction (Grell et al. 2019). Such interactions may escalate to violence. Clients use violence in the context of statutory social services mainly to influence the exercise of public authority and, in some cases, to revenge for what they consider unjust treatment (Littlechild 2005; Munobwa et al. 2021b; BRÅ 2016). Despite the challenges associated with the practice, social workers identify with their professional role as helpers. Some quit or consider quitting work due to client violence and other work-

place stressors, especially when they do not get support from their supervisors (BRÅ 2016; Håkansson 2016; Tham 2007). However, others stay and strive to find ways to balance client concerns, organisational goals, and their well-being.

1.1. Purpose and Justification

This article explores coping methods statutory social workers use to manage violence and threats in their day-to-day dyadic interactions with clients. We focus on social workers' perspectives; thus, we do not highlight clients' agency. Organisational theory postulates that frontline workers have reasonable discretion to decide how they deal with challenges in their client-worker relationships. Discretion refers to the space that allows public workers to adjust and deal with challenges related to delivering public services (Lipsky 2010). Discretion and related practices are explained in detail under the theoretical framework. Discretion makes work manageable in an otherwise challenging environment. The practices used by the frontline workers to adjust services may favour some service users while disadvantaging others. Ultimately, these practices may become de facto policy, which may not match official organisational policy. (Evans and Harris 2004; Johansson 2007; Lipsky 2010). Studying social workers' day-to-day dyadic interactions with clients highlights how coping methods could shape statutory social work policy and practice.

Research exists on coping during public service delivery (e.g., Lipsky 2010; Tummers et al. 2015; Zacka 2017). However, this research is not specific to the context of frontline statutory social workers. Where social workers have been the focus, research has generally addressed coping with high workloads and limited resources (e.g., Astvik and Melin 2013; Collins 2008; Höjer et al. 2021). Client violence presents statutory social workers with an unfamiliar experience of professional powerlessness vis-a-vis clients (Munobwa et al. 2021a). There is a knowledge gap on how social workers cope in day-to-day interactions with hostile clients. Additionally, the perception of workplace violence is evolving, necessitating research based on emergent views of violent encounters. For example, workplace violence is undergoing juridification, rather than being considered a work environment problem, and the definition of violence has broadened (Wikman 2012).

Therefore, statutory social workers' ways of dealing with client violence may differ from ways of dealing with other stressors at work, or how workers in other occupations deal with service user violence. Coping theory suggests that differences in stressful encounters mean that individuals must draw on different resources to cope, depending on the individual's appraisal of the situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 1987). Available research focuses less on the day-to-day dyadic interaction between clients and social workers yet coping methods within the client-worker interactions can shape work practice and define the extent to which organisations meet their goals (Johansson 2007; Lipsky 2010). Therefore, our study focuses on coping with violence in the day-to-day interactions between social workers and their clients.

1.2. Coping with Client Violence

The dual roles of help and control present challenges when social workers interact with violent clients. Social workers often experience a dilemma of perceiving the violence as either deviant client behaviour or a call for help from clients in precarious situations (Keesman and Weenink 2020; Munobwa et al. 2021a). Social workers oscillate between different dispositions depending on their perception of the clients and their role in the situation. Three major themes are recurrent in the literature regarding coping with client violence; we name these themes as (a) embracing the client, (b) disapproving of the client, and (c) indifference towards the client.

"Embracing the violent client" occurs when social workers perceive clients' violent behaviour as a call for help; they try to rationalise the client's behaviour. They consider violence as part of the job, and in some cases blame themselves for the violence (Broadley and Paterson 2020; Munobwa et al. 2021a; The Swedish Work Environment Authority 2018). They consider clients' hostility to be understandable and deal with the situation in a re-

spectful and empathetic manner to de-escalate the violence (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022; Littlechild 2005). Sometimes, they resort to bending or breaking the rules to suit the clients' needs. Rule bending or breaking may include paying out financial assistance based on a loose interpretation of eligibility criteria. Some social workers choose not to report violent incidents according to stipulated organisational procedures because violence is considered part of the job (Zelnick et al. 2013), and they try to protect clients from additional repercussions (Munobwa et al. 2021a). Social workers' role perception as helpers contributes to bending or breaking the rules; they strive to help clients in otherwise complex, oppressive and contradictory organisations (Weinberg and Taylor 2014). Efforts to embrace violent clients are similar to what Tummers et al. (2015, p. 1108) refer to as moving towards clients, i.e., efforts by frontline workers to "adjust to the client's needs, with the ultimate aim to help them". This theme is characteristic of a "caregiver" disposition, whereby frontline workers pay attention to clients' unique life situations and try to meet the client's needs (Zacka 2017).

Public agency personnel studies indicate that victims of service user violence sometimes break or bend the rules due to self-censorship; they fear the recurrence of violence or the potential negative repercussions. Self-censorship in public service delivery refers to situations where frontline workers are fearful and unable to make independent decisions based on correct judgement because clients or managers influence the decision-making process. They make decisions that contravene rules and regulations to avoid confrontation with clients (BRÅ 2016). Self-censorship also happens when workers are mindful of what they say to minimise the risk of hostility from clients, even when this means holding back on important information (BRÅ 2016; Davidovitz and Cohen 2022). Managers, in some situations, force frontline workers to bend or break the rules to keep violent clients at bay (BRÅ 2016; Munobwa et al. 2021a). In situations of self-censorship, bending and breaking rules does not promote the "caregiver" disposition because social workers offer help unwillingly. Instead, they seem to provide service without compassion. However, research addressing self-censorship among professionals in social work is limited.

The second theme is "*disapproving of the violent client*", which involves efforts to set boundaries and let the clients know that violence is unacceptable. In extreme cases, however, social workers retaliate by yelling back and verbally insulting the clients (Lamothe et al. 2022; Tzafrir et al. 2015). Retaliation can, however, escalate the violence (Hershcovis and Reich 2013). Another strategy social workers use is to disconnect and distance themselves from the violent clients, e.g., by choosing not to continue handling the violent clients' issues (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022). The affected social worker is relieved of the violent client, which may not solve the problem because the client remains present in the social services agency. Social workers may consider quitting work due to violence (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022; Tham 2007). Other avoidance practices include meeting the client less frequently and meeting in public places instead of in clients' homes (Kim 2012). Another form of disconnection involves following rules rigidly to show power and limit access to services. Social workers resort to the pedantic interpretation of laws and procedures to make services inaccessible to clients (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022). Methods of coping in this theme reflect the disposition where frontline workers perceive their role as enforcers of the law instead of caregivers (Tummers et al. 2015; Zacka 2017).

Social workers' coping efforts do not always reflect the extremes of either embracing or disapproving of violent clients. Social workers may perceive client violence as deviant, yet they strive to extend empathy and compassion in their interaction with the clients (Tzafrir et al. 2015). They try to balance help and control by attending to the violent clients' needs while maintaining physical and emotional distance. There is a conscious attempt by the social workers to pay attention to clients' needs and to foster the "caregiver" disposition while keeping a physical and emotional distance from the clients. Coping efforts of this nature include having a colleague, supervisor, police officer, or security guard present in physical encounters with clients (Cross et al. 2005; Davidovitz and Cohen 2022) and routinising work by handling clients according to stipulated procedures without emotional

involvement or consideration of the clients' unique situations (Tummers et al. 2015). Coping strategies in this theme reflect *indifference*, whereby frontline workers interact with service users in ways that limit how workers' values and commitments influence decision-making (Zacka 2017). Social workers sometimes file police cases against violent clients to indicate that violence is unacceptable. However, they do not want the clients to be convicted since they consider them to be in precarious situations (Munobwa et al. 2021a).

In summary, there is a need for more research that focuses on coping with hostile relationships that challenge social workers' professional authority. The unique demands from client hostility create a dilemma that current research on coping during public service delivery does not exhaustively address.

2. Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical point of departure is street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010). Street-level bureaucrats are frontline public service workers who deal with service users daily through face-to-face interactions and other contact forms, e.g., telephone and e-mail (Johansson 2007; Lipsky 2010). Insufficient resources, vague policy/agency goals, goal dilemmas and involuntary clients lead to contradictions and confrontations in public service delivery by frontline workers (Lipsky 2010). These dilemmas affect how the frontline workers (street-level bureaucrats) deal with service users, sometimes in favourable ways. However, policy implementation may undermine service-user expectations and trust in public institutions (Lipsky 2010; Zacka 2017). Distrust and unmet needs may lead to mutual suspicion, hate and hostile client-worker relationships (Ferguson et al. 2021).

Discretion is a crucial resource for frontline workers; discretion implies the power to decide on the nature of the client-worker relationship, and what services the client can obtain from public service agencies (Lipsky 2010; Vedung 2015). Whereas laws and organisational procedures exist to guide practice, discretion is necessary to convert broad or ambiguous goals into practice, despite limited resources (Evans 2010; Vedung 2015; Weinberg and Taylor 2014). Discretion is not the absence of rules but the interpretable "space between them" that enables frontline workers to adapt services to clients' unique situations and to make work manageable (Evans and Harris 2004; Lipsky 2010).

Accordingly, frontline workers develop three significant patterns of practice to deal with the dilemmas of frontline work: (1) limiting access and demand, e.g., by stipulating waiting time that discourages service demand; (2) rationing services, e.g., by either prioritising or deferring service users; and (3) client processing, i.e., labelling service users and assigning them to specialised units, and thereby limiting service user expectations and creating compliance (Lipsky 2010; Vedung 2015). Inherent in these practice patterns is help and control (Johansson 2007; Skau 2018). Frontline workers must be flexible to balance care and control; rigid confinement to care or control ignores the client's unique needs (Zacka 2017). In the context of our study, social workers must deal with hostile clients; laws and procedures are in place to deal with troublesome clients, yet social workers have the discretion to make situational decisions depending on the demands of each unique situation. Social workers' perception of violent clients in different situations affects how they deal with them. Lipsky's theory is therefore relevant for our study because it helps to contextualise statutory social workers' dilemmas on three fronts: (1) organisational factors, e.g., limited resources, play a big part in the degeneration of the client-worker relationship; (2) violence is relational and a result of the influences that a social worker and client have on each other, rather than a result of clients' traits; and (3) discretion is central in coping with client violence because it provides social workers with the action space to choose different ways of dealing with violent clients.

3. Materials and Methods

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with social workers in Sweden's statutory individual and family care between November 2018 and March 2019. We called for informants using a request channelled through agency managers and a Facebook group

for social workers (Socionom). We purposively recruited informants who perceived they had been targets of client violence and threats at any time during their career as statutory social workers. We recruited statutory social workers, although we made an exception for three social workers who had recently left the occupation. We interviewed all participants who met our selection criteria and volunteered to participate ($n = 19$). Their age ranged from 24 to 63 years, and their years of experience as social workers ranged from 1.5 to 21 years. The majority were female and worked with child or youth care services. We chose social workers whose job involved but was not limited to investigation, assessment and decision-making related to social services. Each informant's area of specialisation is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample description.

Nr	Fictitious Name	Age	Gender	Specialisation	Years of Work Experience
1	Adam	36	Male	Financial assistance	2
2	Birgitta	26	Female	Financial assistance	3
3	Christian	24	Male	Financial assistance	2
4	Diana	42	Female	Financial assistance	11
5	Eva	32	Female	Financial assistance	1.5
6	Frida	34	Female	Youth services	7
7	Gina	28	Female	Youth services	5
8	Helena	51	Female	Youth services	10
9	Irene	32	Female	Youth services	8
10	Jane	30	Female	Financial assistance	4
11	Kristina	50	Female	Child welfare services	10
12	Lina	29	Female	Child welfare services	5
13	Mike	35	Male	Sheltered employment	8
14	Noah	52	Male	Child welfare services	21
15	Olivia	43	Female	Youth services	12
16	Pia	47	Female	Youth services	15
17	Rita	31	Female	Child welfare services	3
18	Simon	63	Male	Youth services	6
19	Tim	34	Male	Financial assistance	6

Participation was voluntary, and we gave informants information about the purpose of the research, researchers eligible to access the data, the possibility to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality. We use fictitious names in this article and exclude other personal data such as workplace and place of residence. The study got ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2017/429).

All interviews were transcribed and managed in the Atlas.ti program for qualitative data analysis. We conducted an inductive thematic analysis based on a six-phase guide suggested by [Braun and Clarke \(2006, 2021\)](#) and [Clarke and Braun \(2016\)](#). The phases included (1) data familiarisation, (2) coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (6) writing the article. However, we maintained flexibility by not necessarily following the described phases rigidly. For example, we transcribed the first few interviews concurrently with data collection. We adopted this strategy for familiarisation and to identify potentially interesting issues to investigate further in subsequent interviews. Additionally, we generated initial themes simultaneously with coding. The first author coded and generated the initial themes, which were later discussed and refined with the co-authors. The coding and generation of themes occurred at a latent level; we went beyond the semantic meaning of what the informants said and tried to identify and examine underlying meanings ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)). Thus, the resultant themes were theorised and represented second-degree concepts, not just informants' descriptions of violent encounters.

We acknowledge that thematic analysis occurs on a continuum rather than a dichotomy between inductive and deductive analysis. Our analysis was inductive insofar as it was data-driven ([Braun and Clarke 2021](#); [Clarke and Braun 2016](#)). The development of codes and themes was grounded in the data, although we maintained a reflexive oscillation

between the data, theory, and interpretation. For example, previous research on coping by street-level bureaucrats provided a lens through which we compared our codes and themes; however, we did not analyse the data to find or confirm themes identified in previous research.

4. Results

We present the coping methods reported by the informants in four themes based on our interpretation of how they perceived their professional roles and dealt with the violence. We name the themes (1) the forced helper, (2) the compassionate helper, (3) the distanced helper, and (4) the authoritarian helper. The names of the themes reflect our interpretation of the informants' normative and ethical dispositions when they chose different coping methods. The informants used coping methods from different themes depending on the situational demands. The informants' disposition and resultant coping method were not linked to specific forms of client violence; instead, the informants' perception of threat and control in each encounter guided the choice of coping method. However, some informants seemed inclined toward specific dispositions based on their past experiences, level of support from managers, and normative and moral outlook. We describe each theme below.

4.1. The Forced Helper

Involuntary consent by informants to the clients' demands characterised this theme. *Forced helpers* perceived themselves as powerless and forced to make concessions to clients' needs. Fear of recurrence and consequences of violence and threats led to powerlessness. In some cases, *forced helpers* felt coerced by their managers to make decisions favouring the violent clients. Coping strategies in this theme included *bending or breaking the rules* and rewards like *top prioritising* the violent clients.

Bending or breaking the rules meant that the *forced helpers* worked around the social service laws and regulations to meet the clients' demands. For example, informants made decisions based on a less strict interpretation of the law, even when such decisions were not in the clients' best interest. One informant explained:

I am less strict in my assessments when dealing with hostile clients. It happens unconsciously. (Kristina, aged 50, Children and youth worker, 10 year's experience)

Breaking the rules meant informants made unlawful decisions, sometimes sanctioned by managers, to appease the clients. Breaking the rules further weakened the professional authority of the informants, especially when they felt unsupported by their managers. Kristina explained:

It is problematic when the managers do not stand up to support you [...]. You come in as a new worker and want to do things correctly, but the managers tell you otherwise. You lose face before the client, and no one thinks about the fact that you will continue working with and making decisions for the same client. This affects us more than violence itself.

Bending or breaking the rules occurred to de-escalate the violence and avoid further hostility. However, some informants perceived that bending or breaking the rules led to repeated threats and continued violence.

Top prioritising involved quickly processing cases concerning potentially violent clients to avoid hostility. This strategy mainly occurred when assessing and paying out financial assistance. The informants usually had a stipulated time frame to process applications for financial aid, typically seven working days. However, they individually chose more speedy processing for violent clients. Social service agencies sometimes instituted organisational routines that prioritised troublesome clients. One informant explained:

We have special routines for handling violent and querulant clients to avoid confrontation [...]. We usually are two social workers; we double-check to

ensure correct decisions and handle the cases speedily to avoid unnecessary conflict. (Eva, aged 32, financial assistance worker, 1.5 years' experience)

Generally, *forced helpers* felt compelled to heed violent clients, sometimes in unprofessional ways, to silence conflicts with clients. Threatened workers thus rewarded violent clients with more power and influence in decision-making.

4.2. The Compassionate Helper

Compassionate helpers viewed violent clients as people to be pitied and in need of help. They used compassion meaning-making, e.g., by attributing violence to clients' precarious life situations and exhibiting altruism irrespective of the client's behaviour. *Compassionate helpers* adopted coping methods that involved embracing violent clients. Trivialisation and normalisation were inherent in *compassionate helpers'* perception of violence and threats. Nevertheless, they were aware of their limits to discretion in making decisions favourable to the clients. Coping methods in this theme included *protecting, listening, and guiding* violent clients.

While *protecting*, informants tried to alleviate or eliminate the potential punishment of violent clients. They chose not to inform their supervisors or managers about violent encounters. Additionally, they were reluctant to file police cases against violent clients, irrespective of the nature of the violence. The informants' perception of their role as helpers, not antagonists, guided this approach. They believed that reporting would only worsen the clients' life situation, as one youth worker explained:

I have worked with my clients for a long time, and I want to protect them. I want things to go well for them. So, when they threaten me, I attribute the violence to their stressful situation, so I do not report the violent incident to my supervisor or the police. I do not want to cause more damage because the clients have already gone through a lot of troubles. (Gina, aged 28, Youth worker, 5 years' experience)

Many informants using this approach seemed to perceive clients as victims of their situation. They attributed the violence to clients' diminished mental and emotional capacity due to stress, mental ill-health, or substance abuse. Some informants attributed the violence to what they perceived to be intrusive and repressive social service procedures.

Listening and guiding involved giving the violent clients ample time to express their needs or frustrations and showing them how to navigate the social services system. The informants believed that helping clients understand negative decisions related to social services could prevent the escalation or recurrence of violence and threats. The informants also made themselves emotionally available to the violent clients. According to the informants, listening to clients' frustrations was essential rather than directly referring them to complaint/appeal procedures. The informants perceived that referral to complaint/appeal procedures created more frustration because such procedures were lengthy, and clients rarely got immediate answers. One informant explained his experience with fathers in child custody disputes:

These men do not get to meet their children or ex-partners. Because of this, they become frustrated and hostile toward social workers, eventually becoming labelled dangerous people [. . .]. It is essential to dialogue with these men to capture their frustration rather than refer them elsewhere. Frustrated people who are not listened to resort to violence. (Noah, aged 52, child worker, 21 years' experience)

The informants believed that it was important not to show much authority. They expressed the importance of building trust and a good client relationship, even when they could not change or make decisions in favour of the clients.

4.3. The Distanced Helper

Distanced helpers viewed violent clients as people needing help but also as potentially dangerous. Like compassionate helpers, they believed their role was to take care of the

needs and well-being of the clients according to service laws and procedures. However, they considered their safety and well-being to be equally important. For *distanced helpers*, it was essential to help the clients while simultaneously protecting themselves. Their coping efforts entailed helping from a distance, both physically and emotionally. Coping methods included *emotional distancing*, *physical and digital distancing*, *symbolic distancing*, and *routinising work* with violent clients.

The informants used *emotional distancing* to lessen the psychological burden of client violence. They deliberately avoided engaging emotionally in the clients' concerns. In addition, they chose not to think or reflect on how violence affected them. One informant explained:

I block my feelings from the bad things that happen [. . .]. Many incidents happen all the time, and you have to pull yourself together and move on. (Frida, aged 34, youth worker, 7 years' experience)

According to the informants, they had the emotional capacity to engage in their work but chose a blunted approach when interacting with violent clients.

Physical and digital distancing meant that informants avoided meeting clients. They also avoided answering telephone calls or responding to e-mails from potentially violent clients. The informants did not book meetings with the clients or chose to end meetings or telephone conversations when they felt that the clients were hostile or threatening. The informants felt they had interpretation precedence when determining whether clients were aggressive. Frida explained further:

I have become quick at ending meetings when clients begin threatening me. I do not think we [social workers] should tolerate clients who shout at us It is a high price to pay. (Frida, aged 34, youth worker, 7 years' experience)

In some cases, informants, especially those with longer work experience, refused to take on clients with a known history of violence. Avoiding troublesome clients became a burden for newly recruited co-workers who felt compelled to take on these problematic clients.

Symbolic distancing involved practices that implicitly enhanced the informants' authority and widened the gap between the social workers and clients. For example, the informants worked in pairs with a sit-in colleague when meeting potentially violent clients. Sometimes, the informants had police or security guards present while meeting clients. One informant explained her motivation for involving the police during a home visit:

There is in-built respect for the police, and clients tend to become cautious when the police show up. There is a big difference in how people perceive us compared to the police, even in similar situations. (Irene, aged 32, youth worker, 8 years' experience)

In other situations, the informants requested security guards to be visible at the agency reception when they expected a visit from a violent client. Others asked a colleague to "peep in" during client meetings. In many cases, these procedures were part of organisational safety plans.

Furthermore, the informants *routinised* their contact with violent clients, ignoring the possibility of making decisions based on the clients' unique situations. The informants considered clients as just one among many without finding out more about each client's life situation.

4.4. The Authoritarian Helper

Lastly, *authoritarian helpers* perceived themselves as bureaucrats with power; they accentuated their authority while enforcing laws and procedures related to social services. They perceived clients as unreliable and not to be trusted. In this way, *authoritarian helpers* justified their approach toward hostile clients. Some *authoritarian helpers* were motivated by the resolve to oppress or retaliate. Coping methods in this theme included *confrontation*, *pedantry*, and *deferred processing*.

The informants berated the clients through *confrontation* and signalled that violence was unacceptable. Some replied insolently and emphasised zero tolerance for violence. One informant explained:

I get furious when I find out that a client has said bad stuff about my colleagues or me. I call the client and scold them. Sometimes I get shit for doing this, but I don't care. (Helena, aged 51, youth worker, 10 years' experience)

Coping by confrontation was exclusively verbal; no informant mentioned physical confrontation.

Informants using *pedantry* accentuated their authority by being excessively meticulous about laws and procedures. During interaction with violent clients, they were overly attentive to details, aware that it was oppressive to the clients. In this way, they used a resistance strategy against clients' perceived troublesome behaviour. A financial assistance worker narrated:

I become very negative when a client threatens me; I try to find more reasons to reject the client's application. . . . I feel defeated whenever I pay financial assistance to a violent client, even when the client qualifies for the payment. (Birgitta, aged 26, financial assistance worker, 3 years' experience)

Deferred processing meant that the informants deliberately slowed the handling of violent clients' cases. Informants used this strategy to signal their authority and sometimes to revenge against violent clients. Generally, *authoritarian helpers* were mainly concerned with sustaining their superiority over the violent clients; clients' needs were secondary.

5. Discussion

In this article, we explored coping methods used by statutory social workers to manage violence in their day-to-day dyadic interactions with clients. In our analysis, we applied a theoretical perspective from street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010). Our findings show that coping methods could be distinguished into four themes depending on social workers' moral and normative dispositions. The themes are (1) the forced helper, (2) the compassionate helper, (3) the distanced helper, and (4) the authoritarian helper. Common to each theme is that social workers, independent of the chosen coping strategy, perceive themselves to be helpers. However, social workers combine their "helper" role with controlling clients to varying degrees in each theme, guiding how they manage hostile clients in their day-to-day interactions. Our findings contribute to previous knowledge by adding "the forced helper" coping disposition.

5.1. Balancing Help and Control

Social workers oscillate between different dispositions depending on situational needs, striving to balance helping and controlling clients. Put on a continuum, i.e., *forced helper*—*compassionate helper*—*distanced helper*—*authoritarian helper*, social workers' coping efforts reflect their perceived level of authority. Forced helpers experience the lowest degree of control, while authoritarian helpers have the highest (See Figure 1). The choice of coping disposition is impacted by how the social workers perceive the violent client (i.e., as a person in need of help, a dangerous person, or both) and support from the organisation. This appraisal process is in line with the transactional perspective on coping, i.e., the relationship between person and environment has a bearing on the appraisal of threat and the mobilisation of coping resources (Lazarus and Folkman 1987). Previous research shows that public service workers draw on three typical dispositions when dealing with challenges in service delivery, namely, caregiving, indifference, or control (Lipsky 2010; Tummers et al. 2015; Zacka 2017). Our study extends this research by highlighting the "forced helper" disposition, which shows that sometimes, social workers must deal with the unfamiliar position of powerlessness compared to service users. Previous research indicates that social workers have considerable power when dealing with clients (Skau 2018; Smith 2008). Social workers' powerlessness in the dyadic relationship with clients has received

less attention. Thus, coping methods not only reflect social workers' free will to act in specific ways; they are sometimes forced to act, as shown in the "forced helper" disposition.

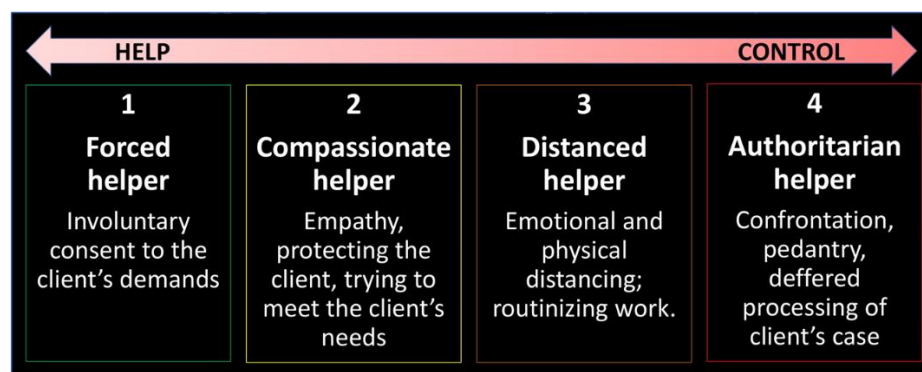


Figure 1. Social workers' perceived professional role in different coping dispositions.

Additionally, the mediating effect of attribution cannot be ignored when trying to understand how social workers position themselves to deal with hostile clients. Attribution theory postulates that individuals attempt to establish a cause-effect relationship to understand others' behaviour, even when no relationship exists. The cause of an encounter can be considered dispositional, i.e., a result of the characteristics of a person, or situational, i.e., depending on situational characteristics of an encounter (Heider 1958; Kelley 1973). This also seems true for social work practice; for example, Lamothe et al. (2018) found that child protection workers tend to attribute client hostility to personal characteristics of clients such as impulsivity or distress (Lamothe et al. 2018). The attributions consequently affect how social workers deal with hostile clients, either with empathy and concern or disgust and anger. In a study of healthcare workers, Wikman (2012) established that violence from patients was attributed to either patients' bad behaviour, or situational factors beyond the patients' control. Patients were framed as "bad guys", "poor guys", or both, which reflected on the measures suggested to deal with the patients. Similar attributions are plausible for social workers; their perceptions and attributions of violence seem to influence their coping methods.

We decipher a stark power imbalance on the extremes of our coping continuum. As forced helpers, social workers experience powerlessness, which can jeopardise the implementation of laws, ethics, and procedures of social services. On the other extreme, authoritarian helpers seem to make clients powerless in ways that limit clients' agency (see Figure 1). Dominating and paternalising clients risks degenerating into oppressive social work (Dominelli 2002). Lipsky (2010) highlights that frontline workers limit clients' demand and access to services while coping with work dilemmas. For example, through clientification and routinising work, clients' unique life situations and needs are undermined. In the same way, social workers' discretionary powers to label some clients as violent and consequently handle them pedantically may limit clients' access to services.

Our findings add to previous research by highlighting the importance of discretion that enables social workers to adapt their practice to different situational demands. Discretion is the necessary space between rules that enables public service workers to manoeuvre service delivery considering clients' diverse needs (Evans and Harris 2004; Lipsky 2010). Our findings suggest that social workers oscillate between different dispositions to make service delivery manageable. When used appropriately, all dispositions may be advantageous in protecting social workers and making their work manageable. However, the forced helper disposition seems more professionally challenging because being forced to heed clients' demands typically leaves a trace of negative feelings. It seems necessary for social workers to be able to draw on different dispositions to meet the unique challenges presented by each client. Social workers must take caution to avoid getting rooted in one disposition

over others. Dispositions are destructive when they become enduring ways of dealing with service users (Zacka 2017).

5.2. Is Client Violence and Coping among Social Workers Cyclical?

Statutory social services involve decisions about granting or limiting clients' access to resources or infringing on their private life. Like other frontline workers, social workers strive to find balance in their interactions with clients, despite the constrained resources and sometimes conflicting organisational goals (Johansson 2007; Lipsky 2010). However, clients are not always satisfied and may resort to threats and aggression towards the social workers. Client violence represents a dyadic relationship through which clients attempt to influence decisions related to social services (BRÅ 2016; Munobwa et al. 2021b). To deal with hostile clients, social workers draw on the different methods of coping discussed above, some of which are oppressive and risk escalating client dissatisfaction and hostility. Additionally, when social workers make concessions to violent clients, they may indirectly signal that it is acceptable for clients to use violence to influence decisions. Thus, social workers and clients may find themselves in hostile client–worker relationships, characterised by mutual dislike and distrust (Ferguson et al. 2021). These conditions risk escalating the violence, as shown in Figure 2. In the figure, we illustrate the possible cyclical nature of violence and coping. For example, clients' unmet needs lead to client hostility, to which social workers respond with pedantry, making clients more agitated. This cyclical relationship is in line with previous studies that offer partial support for the cyclical nature of client violence. For example, Lamothe et al. (2022) found that child protection workers experiencing distress after a violent episode were at a high risk of subsequent victimisation in the short run. A plausible explanation is that high levels of psychological distress and emotional exhaustion experienced by social workers (e.g., due to client violence) lead to reduced empathy and concern for clients, which triggers client hostility (Winstanley and Hales 2015).

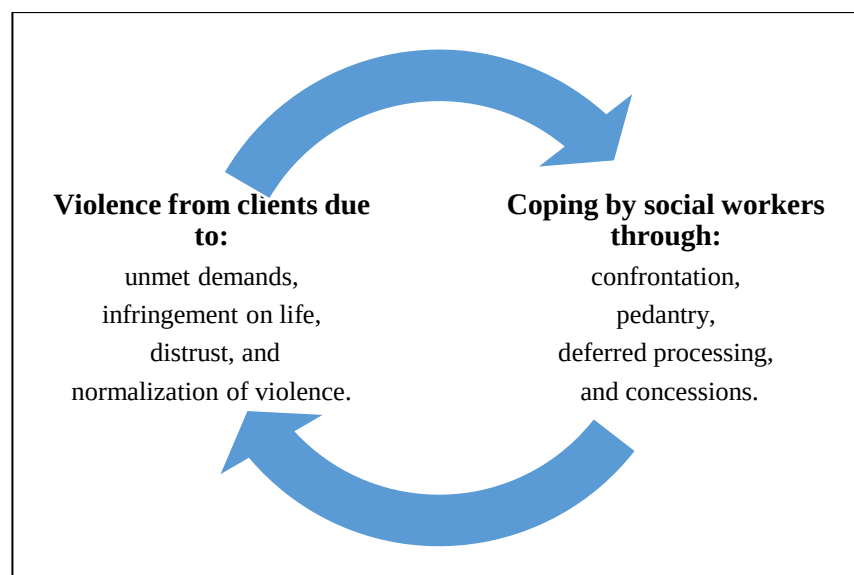


Figure 2. The cyclic relationship between client violence and social workers' coping methods.

6. Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

Our findings provide insight into how statutory social workers cope with the day-to-day challenges arising from violence and threats from service users. Previous research suggests that coping methods by frontline workers are unofficially accepted within organisations and may become standard practice or policy in frontline work over time. Our findings are, therefore, crucial because they indicate how coping with day-to-day service interactions may influence statutory social work practice. However, the findings are based on a small sample of Swedish social workers, and we do not investigate differences and

similarities in different areas of specialisation in social work. Our analysis' main point of departure is discretion, which shows that social workers can adjust their practice to make the job manageable. However, discretion occurs within social and organisational structures. Factors such as managerial control, collegial support, individual traits and experience, and cultural differences may influence how social workers cope with hostile clients. We have not explored these issues in our study. Further research must integrate these issues and investigate the relationship between coping dispositions and health outcomes. It is also necessary to go beyond individual coping methods and consider "coping cultures", i.e., the collective ways organisations deal with workplace violence.

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