

# Narratives of individual capacities: Positive organisational scholarship amongst child welfare workers in Norway

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## Abstract

Child welfare services across the world are often criticised for the quality of service and care that they provide. Whilst the validity of some of these criticisms is debatable, critics often neglect to take into account the intense nature and working conditions of this work, staff mental health and well-being, and the range of work-related psychosocial risks in child welfare workers' (CWW) daily work. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore CWW work experiences and personal capacities to conduct their work. We achieve this through the lens of positive organisational scholarship and in-depth interviews with sixteen CWW in Norway. Thematic narrative analysis yielded five distinct personal capacities: showing commitment and going the extra mile, viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and growth, demonstrating confidence and efficacy beliefs, controlling work behaviours and prioritising work tasks. These personal capacities enabled CWW to perform their work despite excessive pressure and demands at work, since they serve as protective factors for their well-being and performance. Our in-depth findings highlight the utility of making more resources available for building and maintaining individual capacities to support this work group, especially when changing the nature of the work and working conditions is not feasible.

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## Introduction

The current study explores the essence of individual capacities in the face of work-related psychosocial risks amongst child welfare workers (CWWs) in Norway. Whilst Child Welfare Services (CWS) in Norway have faced consistently harsh criticisms of the nature and quality of their provision in recent past (Bergmark and Lundström, 2011; Iversen and Heggen, 2016; Juhasz, 2020), the working conditions of CWW seldom received attention, whilst the nature and types of challenges that these workers face day-to-day in their working lives is poorly understood. Fundamentally, the main aim of the CWS is to support children and adolescents in need or at risk and parents in financial hardship (Lauritzen *et al.*, 2018). Although evaluating the quality and practice of social work provision more broadly (and specifically child welfare in our case) is of vital importance (Blom and Morén, 2012), addressing the working conditions and health and well-being of CWWs is fundamental to providing quality of care. This understanding is essential for developing support for front line CWW who work directly with children and families in often complex and unprecedented situations, and whose experiences are crucial for discussions around improving the quality of the work of child welfare services.

The prevalence of work-related psychosocial risks amongst CWWs is extremely high (McFadden *et al.*, 2015). Extreme work demands and negative psychosocial work experiences affect the job performance, well-being and health amongst this group (Lizano and Barak, 2012). Since the vast majority of the CWW workforce are in the frontline, not in senior leadership positions nor in administrative posts, it is important to understand their experiences in order to pursue strategies to support effective coping with work pressures. This idea is in line with effective organisational health interventions, where employee participation is a key ingredient and a thread that binds successful interventions from start to finish, through the stages of 'preparation, screening, action planning, implementation, and evaluation' (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, there is research consensus that interventions that help workers deal with stressful situations at work are more likely to be successful if workers are involved in their processes (e.g. Nielsen and Randall, 2013). Often, psychosocial risks in the workplace are difficult to remove when they are part of the nature job itself. Ongoing high pressure to deal with emotionally difficult cases, disturbed family members, and trauma in children in care, combined with

caseloads which tend to be consistently high pose a threat to the health, well-being and productivity of CWWs (Olaniyan *et al.*, 2020). As such, effective solutions to support CWWs in dealing with the excessive demands of this work are needed. Therefore, understanding the psychosocial risks that CWWs experience and, importantly, the individual resources and capacities that they use to cope with these pressures can inform effective support for this group of key workers.

## Psychological capacities

Organisational psychology scholars view the workplace as a social arena where employees navigate through work tasks and learn and develop with colleagues and their leaders (De Cremer *et al.*, 2011). Many of these work experiences are shared amongst individuals who perform the same work, work in the same environment or with the same group of colleagues and clients/patients or are managed and led by the same team of leaders. However, many are also personal to each everyone in any given workplace (Karanika-Murray and Weyman, 2013) as they are filtered through their unique attitudes, needs and aspirations to affect their individual work outcomes, including their well-being and performance. When individuals are unable to change the nature of their work, adjust their tasks or reduce exposure to stressful situations, possessing the strategies necessary to reduce the impact of these situations on their health and well-being becomes a priority.

Research has highlighted the importance of effective individual coping strategies amongst CWWs (McFadden *et al.*, 2015; Singh *et al.*, 2020). There are three reasons for focusing on individual capacities. First, exposure to work-related psychosocial risks amongst CWW is an element of the job itself (Madden *et al.*, 2014). The prevalence of work-related psychosocial risks is higher amongst CWW compared to any other sector within the human services (Madden *et al.*, 2014; McFadden *et al.*, 2015), which renders them a high-risk group. Secondly, whilst work resources such as supportive colleagues and leaders are important, they are also inadequate on their own for helping to build effective individual coping strategies amongst CWWs. This is because most of the daily tasks CWW are conducted individually rather than in teams, rendering first-hand coping strategies necessary and more appropriate for this group. Whilst the importance of supportive colleagues and leaders is unquestionable, possessing strong individual coping mechanisms will help CWWs cope with daily pressures on impact and in an actively rather than reactively. For instance, of the three most common key approaches for coping with life and work stress (Folkman *et al.*, 1986), problem-centred coping, where the worker takes active steps to address the stressful situation, for example 'by delegating some of his responsibilities, talking to his supervisor about work reduction, or

using time-management techniques', is more likely to yield better outcomes (Miller, 2003, p. 238). Thirdly, the majority of research with this work group focuses on work-related outcomes (especially staff turnover) rather than on individual psychosocial resources (Olaniyan *et al.*, 2020) that can be protective as well as help individuals to react to stressful situations. However, the impact and affective reactions of stressful work (such as strain, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, work–family conflict, unfairness, etc.) is a personal matter, making a focus on individual coping mechanisms and strategies a good starting point. Finally, it is possible that individual capacities, such as working to one's own strengths or stress management training, can augment the effect of external resources such as social support. For example, when a CWW's heavy workload leads to him/her experiencing burnout and secondary traumatic stress, the combination of external support resources (e.g. receiving acknowledgement or tangible support from caring and reliable colleagues and leaders) can help the individual cope with these experiences if he/she already has internal psychosocial resources (e.g. the trust to seek help, understanding her own preferences and limitations, and knowing how to utilise social resources). A combination of individual psychosocial and work environment resources is therefore important.

However, although research on CWS highlights this individual–environment duality, we know less about individual psychosocial resources amongst CWWs. Thus, more recent research has also focused away from the work environment and on understanding individual capacities amongst CWWs. DePanfilis and Zlotnic's (2008) systematic review on the impact of exposure to negative work experiences identified two groups of factors as important for affecting workers' retention decisions: organisational factors (i.e. salary and benefit, co-worker and leadership support) and personal factors (i.e. organisational commitment, self-efficacy and low levels of emotional exhaustion). Similarly, McFadden *et al.*'s (2015) review of the research on resilience and burnout amongst CWW identified individual worker motivation, personal awareness and development, positive personal coping style as most important contributors to resilience.

Therefore, given that working conditions have a substantial impact on health and well-being but are often not amenable to change, we focus on CWWs' psychosocial resources. Understanding their perspectives and narratives around the resources that they tend to use to deal with work demands can provide helpful insights to inform interventions to improve CWWs' working conditions, health and well-being and their performance.

### Positive organisational scholarship

Positive organisational scholarship (POS) 'focuses on dynamics that are typically described by words such as excellence, thriving, flourishing,

abundance, resilience, or virtuousness' (Cameron *et al.*, 2003, p. 4). In the present study we adopt POS because it focuses on 'the states and processes that arise from and result in life-giving dynamics, optimal functioning, and enhanced capabilities and strengths' (Dutton and Glynn, 2007, p. 693). Unlike positive psychology, which emerged as a reaction to the predominant focus in the field of psychology on deterioration and illness and an attempt to redress this skewed focus on the negative (Cameron and Spreitzer 2012), POS emerged because an array of organisational phenomena was being ignored in research. Such phenomena were neither systematically studied nor valued (Cameron and Spreitzer 2012, p. 6), but were also invaluable for understanding how the dynamics of optimal functioning can inform our practice. Therefore, we adopt POS to understand the positive dynamic experiences of work and in work organisations, i.e. those individual and personal attributes that CWWs already possess, or can learn and further develop to support their adaptation. POS highlights several positive individual attributes (Cameron and Spreitzer, 2012), of which the current study focuses on optimal functioning, life-giving abilities and enhanced individual capabilities and strengths to guide our examination and understanding of CWW work-related experiences.

## Research question

The present study was developed to provide answers to the question 'what are the individual psychological resources or strategies that CWWs employ to cope with work-related stress?' Although there is consensus in the literature on a range of psychosocial capacities, the available empirical evidence tends to be rather narrowly focused on resilience and with little understanding of psychosocial capacities amongst CWWs (McFadden *et al.*, 2015). We therefore adopted an exploratory qualitative approach as most appropriate to address our research question.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

Narrative accounts were collected from CWWs as part of a project led by the first author on the essence of individual, social and leadership support for employees' thriving and well-being. A total of fourteen CWS across the cities of Norway, with between 15 and over 100 CCWs, were contacted for permission to recruit participants and asked to forward an invitation to take part to their staff. The present study included frontline

CWW with over three years of experience in the field and in addition two informants working within child welfare institutions (who had previously worked in the frontline). Data were collected from sixteen CWWs via semi-structured interviews. Four were conducted online (over Skype) and twelve face-to-face in the CWWs' cities, between June and September 2019. Table 1 highlights the characteristics of the study participants, of whom fifteen were women and all had worked as CWWs for over three years.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in Norwegian. A language expert was consulted to ensure that the translated quotes that are included in this article represent the informants' narratives. The first author recruited the participants, booked interview venues and carried out the interviews with support from the second author. The interviews lasted between thirty-seven and eighty-three minutes. The present study received ethical approval by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

## Materials

The semi-structured interviews were anchored in four questions: 'Can you describe the types of tasks you are involved with daily?', 'How satisfied are you with your work hours?', 'How do you deal with challenges at work?' and, linked to that, 'Can you describe what functions well at work, and share your thoughts around why it works?'

**Table 1.** Participants' socio-demographic characteristics

Characteristics	N participants
Age (in years)	
25–35	9
35–45	3
45 and over	4
Race	
White Caucasian	15
Persian	1
Educational level	
Bachelor degree	6
Master's degree	7
Other	3
Relationship status	
Married/with a partner	13
Single/divorced	3
Number of children	
None	2
1–2	10
3–5	4
Work experience (in years)	
1–5	2
5 and over	14

## Analytical approach: Thematic narratives

We adopted the narrative approach, which was appropriate for understanding participants' experiences and allowed for an in-depth analysis of their responses. In its simplest form, narrative accounts are the stories that individuals or groups of individuals choose to tell others about aspects of themselves, their lives and experiences in any given situation or context. In this regard, the application of narrative analysis allows us to understand how participants make sense of their very own action and that of others, as in identity construction (Josselson, 2011). Whilst we tend to associate narratives with oral and written accounts, their meaning is far broader. Narratives are like stories, and the researcher is usually interested not only in the story but also in the final product (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives can be retrieved from conversations heard during a fieldwork, a natural occurring chat, or a structured interview (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008). The present study is nested in two of Chase's (2005) distinctive situations for a narrative: (1) a focus on specific characters (here CWWs) and (2) a focus on specific sets of life experience (here, the work environment).

The analysis of the participants' narratives followed the guidelines for thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012) and its six-phase approach: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing potential themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Thematic analysis can be fruitfully combined narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008; Terry *et al.*, 2017). As pointed out by Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 58) thematic analysis 'is only a method of data analysis, rather than being an approach to conducting qualitative research'.

The interviews were transcribed, and a number was assigned to each participant. Line-by-line coding was employed with the aim to identify patterns in the participants' narratives. Summaries were then made of these accounts under suitable labels to develop an overview of the participants' narrative accounts. Next, themes of the participants' representation of their work life and work environment were identified. Familiarity with the data and generation of initial codes allowed us to establish the themes and narratives. Throughout this process, positive organisational scholarship was applied to extract and interpret the themes from participants' narratives.

## Results

Thematic analysis of the interviews extracted five narratives of positive organisational scholarship. These themes described the CWWs' experiences of their working life and how they deal with their work pressures.

The five themes were: (1) showing commitment and going the extra mile; (2) viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and growth; (3) demonstrating confidence and efficacy beliefs; (4) enacting conscious control of work behaviours; and (5) setting priorities. Each of these are described next.

### Theme 1: Showing commitment and going the extra mile

Most participants described themselves as committed despite experiencing consistent negative circumstances and pressures in their daily work. Their narratives of their everyday work encapsulate highly complex, emotional, engaging and unpredictable workloads. Nevertheless, most of our respondents persisted at offering appropriate and professional services to the families and children in care. As one of the participants described, she had a full life with friends and family outside of work but was still able to put in additional work hours to her work schedule:

I get the most serious cases since I have worked for several years. I have very exciting and versatile tasks. It is rare that I go home at 4 o'clock. It is common to go home at 5, 6, or 7 o'clock and in the worst periods I could be at work between 8 and 9 o'clock in the evening. [...] It's not that I do not have a life outside. I have interests, I have friends, I have things to do at home in my own life [...] Once you have started working with a family in crisis, it is almost impossible to say "now is 15:30, so we'll take care of the rest of your problems tomorrow". (Interviewee 6)

This demonstration of commitment was not limited to work tasks. The respondents also described how they helped colleagues with their work tasks despite the pressures of their own workload. Not only are they committed to completing their work, but they also reach out to support colleagues without expectations in return.

One line up for the other. Maybe sometimes help others to write task reports. Not necessarily my case, I have nothing to do with it, but I saw my colleague under tremendous pressure, and I chose to write many task reports for her, without saying anything about it to anyone. [...] And I had my own issues but chose to do so because she was in a difficult situation. And I think many of us do this, although not everyone. I think it has something to do with who you are as a human being. (Interviewee 8)

There were variations in the narratives of commitment amongst our respondents. Whilst interviewee fifteen recognised the challenging situation as a frequent occurrence, interviewee 7 described her experiences as frustrating, due mainly to the substantial number of cases she is responsible for. Nevertheless, her narratives of her workplace experiences embodied passion and commitment:



The job is incredibly significant and meaningful, but very draining. Yes, because I know I'm doing an important job, and I know I'm making a difference, but then you have to look closely at yourself to see those differences. Because it burns like that all the time so that if I manage to land a situation then suddenly it's something else. So you kind of do not have time to think "now we have managed to do something good, here we have changed something". I'm really passionate about that job, I cannot imagine another job I want to do than this one. This is the job I want. (Interviewee 7)

## Theme 2: Viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and growth

The majority of the informants reported staff turnover as one of the factors most strongly linked to their high workload. The extremely high staff turnover both in several CWS agencies and in the sector overall exacerbates their already challenging work. Despite their energy-draining daily work tasks, CWWs chose to carry on with pride in their work:

I am very conscious that high workload should not negatively affect me. In a sense, I want to complete all the tasks on my list. I believe that whatever is worth doing is worth doing well. I am also very convinced that in order to complete these tasks, I have to work more hours than I should, then I get tired, and not be present for my own family. And it's happening all the time. (Interviewee 1)

One common response was that working in child welfare was not what CWWs imagined that the role would be like. Nevertheless, most of them were able to accept the reality of their role. As one of our respondents put it when reflecting on her work when she first started compared to her present work experiences:

(Silence). That has not changed much. I didn't know what I was going for. Had I known that the work pressure would be so great, I'm a little unsure that I would have chosen it (laughs). So now it's like that's what I can do, it's a very important job, so far it works. After all, the kids need someone to step up for them, yes. (Interviewee 1)

Not only did most of the CWWs experience their work as meaningful for improving the lives of families and children in care, but also accepted the burden that came with the work. One of the interviewees maintained that:

I don't always look forward to going to work but, I'm not scared neither. But I feel that it challenges me to develop myself as a professional by working in the service. And that's what drives me the most to get me to keep going. (Interviewee 15)

Some of the interviewees also reflected that they could not see themselves working elsewhere. Despite quitting office work, some remained in the field. For example:

I quit my job two years ago. But then I have chosen to return to the same job in another office and municipality. I really chose to come back because I like the challenges I face in the job, and it is a job that has a very high tempo [. . .] Because jobs in CWS are so varied, suddenly it is acute, suddenly it is a serious matter [. . .] There something happening all the time, the tempo is very high, and I like challenges, and I meet that in child welfare services I do not think there are other jobs that can challenge me at the same meeting as a job in BV can do. And there is very professional development in it. And it is a very exciting industry. (Interviewee 8)

Lastly, one of our respondents narrated how her work at the CWS motivated her despite the challenges:

Because of my education as a child welfare educator. There is also something about those challenges. I could never think and work in other public sectors. I prefer to work where things happen, where you can do something meaningful. You can with BV. I can help children who are in pain, because I have the skills and knowledge. I know who I can contact if and when needed and it makes sense. (Interviewee 3)

### **Theme 3: Demonstrating confidence and efficacy beliefs**

The respondents' narratives of confidence and efficacy beliefs became clear when they talked about the difficulties of their jobs. For example:

I have probably thought of this many times when it becomes really hectic that "this is not going to work", but I come to the conclusion that "this is what I am passionate about, and this is what I want to do" and I know that I can, and I know I'm good at it. I have received feedback from both children and parents [. . .] even if this is difficult. So I feel confident that I know the job I do, but it is clear that when you have small children yourself, it is difficult to have such a job. (Interviewee 7)

The length and volume of experience that CWWs had developed in the field was an important factor for the respondents' narratives of confidence amongst our respondents. As one interviewee described:

Of course, there have been some tasks that I have found daunting over the years, but then I was inexperienced. But today I have a lot of experience and am quite confident and not afraid to meet my tasks. (Interviewee 6)

The respondents' narratives described how everyday challenges created substantial experiences that formed the building blocks of confidence:

I am very confident that I know my job. I'm very confident that I know what I'm going to do at work somehow. Also I manage to find out if I cannot, I am not afraid of situations or issues that may arise, I am so sure I can handle it. I am very confident; I have a lot of experience and that there is not much that is challenging with my job except that I have to work all the time. But, the tasks I think are manageable, also the challenges that can come through it. I have the expertise needed to deal with them. (Interviewee 14)

The interviewees believed that their confidence was a result of the challenges and experiences that they had developed over the years. For example:

I am more confident BV is working now. I have more and more gained great faith in myself. I cannot doubt that not all children do well even if I do my best. (Interviewee 13)

#### Theme 4: Enacting conscious control of work behaviours

When the participants described their work schedules, patterns of control amidst uncontrollable events experienced as the norm were apparent. For example, when asked what is essential for thriving in this role, one said:

One should be in place in one's own life. It's not a job you should have if you have a lot of crises in your private life. If you have a very sick child, or a sick man, then this can be a tedious job to have. It is required to have great working capacity. It is required that one manages to be unpopular and can withstand long-term resistance. And it's not for everyone, because everyone would be equal, right. It is a job you must endure in your own decisions, the management's decisions. You must endure living in uncertainty. You should be professionally interested and up to date in psychology, CW and law. You must constantly work with the children in focus. You must be humble true, have respect for other people, have empathy, but not too much that goes beyond your professional judgment. You must be clear, be open, be in your place. (Interviewee 6)

Many of the informants demonstrated clarity regarding what it entails to thrive in child welfare. To illustrate, one of the interviewees said:

Working in the child welfare is a special job, it is not suitable for everyone. Telling people that "this doesn't work, you don't fit into this job, you can think working somewhere else". Maybe you can work as a carer, or you can fit better in other welfare offices, that's because you have to be strong mentally yourself before you can manage to help others. (Interviewee 6)

## Theme 5: Setting priorities

Another common strategy employed by the majority of our respondents was the ability to prioritise their work cases. As reflected in their narratives on work pressure, being able to discern the importance of cases and then pursue them according to their strengths (often paying little attention to the time limits set by the city councils) has enabled them to cope with pressures. As one of our respondents put it:

I have challenges all the time (laughs), yes absolutely. I am very keen to taking one case at a time, to take what is most important first, so it is in a way a strategy. (Interviewee 14)

Whilst most of the interviewees expressed that it is very important to prioritise work as necessary, some believe that the ability to make good decisions depends greatly on one's personality. As another interviewee expressed it:

I think it's more about personal identity, also who you are as a person. I like to have conversations with those young people because I think that is the most important thing since I work in the youth group and we are CW and we are here for the children, right, so I like to prioritize having [...] everything is about prioritisation in CWS. You must be good at prioritising, you must be good at structuring your everyday work so that things will work out. I think it's a lot about who you are as a person and, true, and what kind of relationship you manage to handle, and what you simply prioritise. (Interviewee 15)

Despite or perhaps because they experienced high commitment and meaning in their work, most are also able to say 'no'. The ability to look at 'the bigger picture' and declining additional work, where possible, would lead to less sickness absence and being away from family. This was the case for one of the interviewees:

I've learned that I cannot always say yes to everything. That I have to put my health and family first. So I cannot always work a late shift on Friday. I have to go home sometimes. [...] You want to do everything you can, but then you can never go home from work. Because there is always someone who is in pain, there is always someone who needs you even more. And if in a way you say yes, and yes and yes all the time then you have nothing of yourself or your own everyday life. And then in the end you have nothing to give at work. (Interviewee 4)

Another factor linked strongly to prioritising was the ability to compartmentalise work experiences, which also allowed some of the respondents to maintain work–life balance. For example:

I try to distinguish between work and leisure, yes so that when I go home I do the usual things like family, friends [...] then I do other things, I am busy with other things. I've been like that a lot. I like to have a vacation that is not job related. I'm not very happy to go out

with a colleague and drink beer. I want or drink beer with someone else.  
(Interviewee 16)

## Discussion

The present study aimed to examine how CWWs deal with workplace psychosocial risks, focusing specifically on understanding the individual capacities and strategies that they utilise to accomplish their work tasks effectively. Although the specific work tasks that our participant CWWs engaged in every day varied, the narrative approach allowed us to identify consistent themes. The data revealed five narratives: showing commitment and going the extra mile, viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and growth, demonstrating confidence and efficacy beliefs, controlling work behaviours and prioritising work tasks. Each of these five narratives of individual capacities is embedded in POS and allowing us to understand how POS is enacted in this highly pressured work group.

First, despite the excessive heavy workload and work pressures, the participants in our study narrated how they have remained committed, confronting challenges and focusing on turning these adversaries into a source of personal growth and development. In this regard, the focus of POS on life-giving attributes and enhanced individual abilities and strengths maps onto the participants' experiences. These findings corroborate previous research on the importance of commitment. For instance, [Meyer and Allen \(1991\)](#) showed that job commitment plays a vital role for workers' retention decisions. Likewise, more recently [Truter and Fouché \(2021\)](#) found that CWW who demonstrate dedication and commitment to their work also possess self-determination, efficacy, a positive outlook and awareness of one's limitations, and are better able to execute their work tasks. Thus, their commitment to their work enabled them to withstand work pressures and to be efficient and effective.

Secondly, participants also shared stories of going beyond perpetual challenges to use them as opportunities to learn and grow. This is in line with one of the core attributes of POS and as [Cameron and Spreitzer \(2012\)](#) noted: 'challenges and obstacles are reinterpreted as opportunities and strength-building experiences rather than as tragedies or problems' (p. 3). Past research also corroborates the importance of such a positive outlook where challenges are turned into opportunities (e.g. [Truter and Fouché, 2021](#)). In addition, the ability to withstand high work pressures can support thriving at work. For example, [Ellett et al. \(2007\)](#) showed that CWWs who found it difficult to adapt to constant work pressure and who showed weak personal commitment to their work were more likely to quit.

The third theme that emerged related to narrative of confidence and efficacy beliefs. Most of the participants expressed high confidence and capacity to handle high or unplanned demands at work. Indeed, past research on CWWs showed that high efficacy beliefs supported successful coping with work pressures, increased job satisfaction (Chen and Scannapieco, 2010) and increased the ability to deal with emotional exhaustion (Lo Schiavo, 1996).

The fourth theme describes the importance of a sense of control over work tasks and behaviour in the face of multiple and complex work tasks. Specifically, although the CWWs explicitly voiced their dissatisfaction with the workload and a hope that workload could be reduced, they were also well aware of what was required of them to deliver to high standards. Such an awareness and sense of control allows them to be effective at their work and also to deal with the consequences of high workload and burnout (McFadden *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, participants also described how they prioritised their cases in order of importance. This enabled them to enact agency and initiative and attend to their own health and well-being, even if that prioritisation disagreed with set deadlines. The ability and flexibility to set priorities in work tasks allows for consistency, whilst also enabling optimal allocation of job resources to most important tasks (Porter, 2021).

The findings from the present study are consistent with POS, which stresses the importance of focusing on the strength-giving and performance-enhancement attributes, which are more likely to act as catalysts pulling employees away from negative experiences towards positive ones (Cameron and Spreitzer, 2012). Our findings also show that there is more to gain for both management and workers from initiatives and investment in developing individual capacities amongst CWW, as recent research evidence also shows (e.g. Baugerud *et al.*, 2018; Molakeng *et al.*, 2021; Truter and Fouché, 2021). Although the importance and utility of building individual capacities for CWWs cannot be overemphasised, a focus on enhancing individual resources alone is not enough. For instance, research on work ability has stressed the need to both bolster workers' efficacy beliefs and attend to the work environment in order to provide a balance between individual resources and work demands (Ilmarinen *et al.*, 1997; Oakman *et al.*, 2018).

## Strengths and limitations

Since purposive sampling was employed to recruit informants into the study, the possibility of a select or skewed group of participants cannot be excluded. Yet, we can be confident cognate professions have similar experiences (e.g. Negi *et al.*, 2019; Walpita and Arambepola, 2020). The focus on POS is a main strength of our study. In a field that focuses

heavily on work-related psychosocial risk amongst CWWs, the present study is one of few that aim to shift the focus to positive workplace experiences.

## Future research and implications

As with all personal strengths, it is possible that the five emerging themes may work synergistically to protect individuals. Therefore, it would be useful to understand the relative importance of each of these and how they work in combination. In addition, it would be especially useful for practice to identify any supplementary or work-related resources (such as colleague support, flexible work resources or work-related skills) that can be used to build and maintain these psychological capacities. Similarly, it would be useful to conduct more nuanced research to link each or combinations of these resources to specific work demands or stressors and assess their potency for protecting CWWs' health and well-being in the long term.

As a priority with potentially highly effective results, employers should invest resources to build worker's individual capacities, since as many of these can be learned through training, work experience or mentoring. By way of interventions to protect individuals against excessive work demands and build resilience, we recommend a combined focus that starts with organisational-level interventions to change the working conditions and design healthier jobs as the preferred solution (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007) and builds initiatives to build individual capacities amongst this work group. However, in situations where changes to the job or the work environment are not possible, a sole focus on individuals to help them strengthen their individual psychosocial capacities may only be possible. Finally, since similar professions have similar experiences, the findings from the present study would also be beneficial to other social work fields like health care, hospice and palliative care and community social work.

## Conclusions

The current study explored individual psychological capacities through the lens of positive organisational scholarship. Although our target group was a sample of child welfare workers in Norway, the findings can be applied to social workers and other contexts, as social work is one of the most high-pressure occupations across the world. An understanding of individual psychological capacities amongst CWWs can help us to support this group to protect their health and well-being and to deliver high-quality care. To achieve this, organisations can offer a range of

resources, in the form of training, mentoring or social support amongst others. This will allow us to shield CWWs from excessive work pressure, especially when changing working conditions is not feasible.

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