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# COVER PAGE

## Article title:

Manualization in Child and Family Social work. A comparative study of Norway and Wales

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## Abstract:

The article examines the use of manuals in Child and Family Social Work in Wales and Norway and considers their application in the structuring context of new public management and evidence-based practice. It is based upon findings of a comparative survey-based instrument distributed to social workers. The problem statement is: What are social workers' attitudes to and experiences of manuals in professional practice? The key research foci are: How often do you use manuals? Why do you use manuals? To what degree do you think manuals are useful to ensure the quality of the work you perform?

Both workforces use manuals, more so in Norway than in Wales. This is related to the fact that there is direct and stronger pressure from governmental agencies in Norway than in Wales for provider organisations and workers to deploy manuals. The uptake of manuals in Wales appears to be prompted more by worker self-selection and/or imitation of their usage in cognate practice settings. Norwegian workers to a larger extent than those in Wales think using manuals enhances the quality of work. We discuss possible conceptual, institutional, and practitioner-based reasons for the varied relationship between manuals and their application and highlight under-researched areas.

**Keywords:** Manualization, New Public Management, Evidence Based Practice, Cross-National Comparison

## **Introduction**

More than 30 years has passed since the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) in most European countries (Hood & Dixon, 2015). In the same period, evidence-based practice (EBP), first introduced in medicine (Ekeland, Bergem & Myklebust, 2019) and later adopted in most professional practices, has become integrated with NPM and part of social work's present practice paradigm (White & Stancombe, 2002; Okpych & Yu, 2014; Greene & Greene, 2022). The forms of knowledge under NPM are closely linked to the use of manuals in social work which, to varying degrees, reflect the 'steering' ambitions of government, and potentially challenge the foundations of knowledge among social workers by shaping their action repertoire. We focus on NPM, EBP and the use of manuals by practitioners since this relates to the core of professional work. Social workers are street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010), finding themselves operating between steering initiatives from government, the values and knowledge profoundly linked to their occupational mission, and exposed daily to clients and experiences that challenge the sufficiency of their interventions, procedures and professional purpose.

Differences in welfare regimes are likely to have an influence on both steering regimen and practice. The notion of welfare regimes as a mode of comparative study finds its locus in pioneering typological analysis by Esping-Andersen (1989) who points at differences among welfare states such as which sectors of society have responsibility for producing public welfare, and whether this is characterised by universal or specific services. In our study, for example, Norway remains largely a universalist oriented social democratic welfare regime. By comparison, Wales which evinces progressive policy values is unavoidably linked fiscally to a UK austerity-based welfare in which there are few options other than highly targeted provision for the most vulnerable (Gwilym & Williams, 2021). Drawing on Esping-Andersen, we explore selective aspects of the very different welfare regimes in Wales and Norway with regard to the structural forces that exert influence on child and family social workers, particularly regards use of manuals when engaging with vulnerable children and families. This survey-based comparative exploration of family social work practitioners in two small western European countries has produced valuable insights into the work-world of street-level bureaucrats and into the very different ways that state entities in both countries seek to steer (or not) practice through techniques of NPM and EBP. Indeed, our conceptual focus here on the street level

worker via our cross-national survey data is relatively rare in terms of public administration research. Chang & Brewer's (2023) systematic literature review of some 265 articles on street level bureaucracy found that less than 20% drew on their own survey data and less than 1% compared across national boundaries. Given this paucity of inter-national studies we hope our article will make a modest contribution to an under-developed field of study in street-level social work practice in both countries.

### **New Public Management, Street Level Bureaucracy and Manuals – An Overview**

NPM is ideologically underpinned by neo-liberal thought (Harvey, 2005) whereby the public sector is to be guided by market principles and efficient service delivery. This also applies to the relationship between central government and the professions, particularly in the health and social care sectors. Although neo-liberalism underpins market principles and de-regulation, much of the practical interventions are related to a bureaucratic steering of professions by intervening in their management of knowledge. This is sought through promotion of EBP, which in essence asserts that to produce best professional interventions these should rely on 'scientific knowledge' based on randomised controlled trial methods (RCT) and meta-analyses (Guyatt et al., 1992). However, RCTs produce 'average' distributions and when translated into manualised practice are likely to produce a 'one size fits all' approach toward service users who remain as ever unique individuals and families with widely varying needs (Zettle, 2020).

While the original idea behind EBP was to give clinicians a method to strengthen decision-making by including research evidence from clinical epidemiology, it soon became adopted by authorities as a way of organising additional spheres of professional practice. Diverse top-down government projects have been developed to strengthen adherence to EBP; introducing, advocating, or imposing training programmes with manuals to be used by practitioners. It has almost become a political demand to be evidence-based (Høgsbro, 2015). This changes the power relations between the state and the professional, illustrating what Dean (2017) denotes as reflexive governance or governmentality that acts as a kind of 'steering' performed through indirect techniques such as audit, accountability, benchmarking, guidelines, and the use of manuals (Ekeland, 2015).

Social workers are street level bureaucrats operating directly with clients of public services. They work under difficult organisational conditions producing a variety of coping strategies which shape the way public policies are implemented. It is assumed that street level bureaucrats possess a degree of discretion in their daily work (Lipsky, 2010). Social workers typically

possess a professional background in which ethics, training and accreditation underpin a claim to some degree of professional autonomy together with attachment to the profession and its networks (Freidson, 2001; Powell & DiMaggio, 2012; Røvik, 2023). Given the possibility of some professional discretion and autonomy we might expect that the impact of manuals on social work practice may not always be without some friction for practitioners. Literature on the relationship between social work and manuals underlines their top-down character by pointing to governmental authorities being the dominant force initiating the use of manuals, an example being Scandinavian countries (Sørensen, 2016; Lyneborg & Damgaard, 2019; Skillmark & Oscarsson, 2018, 2020; Jacobson & Meeuwisse, 2020). Yet this mediation between the instrumentalism of governmental and organisational interests and professional logics of caring intervention are not necessarily predictive of some linear top-down control via manuals. Bastian (2017) argues that the presence of manuals and standardisation does not necessarily hinder professional discretion, since this can often be negotiated artfully in the everyday work context. For example, Martinell Barfoed (2018) researching the evidence-based Addiction Severity Index interview, found that social workers can (and sometimes need to) depart from a standardised interview procedure to generate a meaningful conversation and get meaningful information. More generally, White and Stancombe (2002) consider that EBP in social care carries a risk of downplaying the importance of interpretation and subtle communicative practices and over-emphasises the utility of outcome-based evidence.

In short, exposure to human situations may reveal abstract and standardised knowledge in the shape of manuals to be insufficient in the discretionary work of street level bureaucrats. Some highlight that manuals, also in a digitalised form, might be experienced as inflexible and inhibiting tools (Sørensen, 2016; Bosk, 2020). However, it would be unwise to assume all manuals as technically inflexible as their impact on practice is likely to vary between different manuals and social workers (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Jorna & Wagenaar, 2007). Indeed, it is an empirical question as to how social workers see their discretion being impacted by manuals – some may see manuals as narrowing their action repertoire, while others may perceive manuals as a useful aid to practice and decision-making and apply some selectivity (Sørensen, 2016; Lyneborg & Damgaard, 2019; Jacobson & Meeuwisse, 2020; Bosk, 2020). Hence manuals are best cast as a dynamic interpretative relationship between worker and manual rather than an intrusive digital device or set of inflexible guidelines. Thus, Petersen et al (2020) reveal how discretion takes place when applying digital manuals in social work child protection services in Denmark and that this interpretative activity might also operate on a collective level

where social workers are part of a team. Relatedly, Ponnert and Svensson (2016) challenge a common notion in the literature that professionals desire extensive opportunities for discretion. Arguably, manuals can be desirable for professionals since abiding by them may strengthen the legitimacy of the organisation and consistency of decision making and thereby reduce uncertainty and public mistrust. Again, it is something of an empirical question as to whether street-level bureaucrats when faced by resource limitations and a troubling workload come to rely on manuals to help standardise work and generate some basic equity in their practice (see Skillmark & Denvalls, 2018).

In a study of manuals in Danish childcare (Sørensen, 2016), social workers reported varied experiences with how manuals impacted the quality of practice related to both the type of manual and aspects of the practitioner. For some, mostly inexperienced workers, manuals seemed to strengthen the quality of work since it helped them avoid overlooking important aspects of their cases (see also Devlieghere, Bradt & Roose, 2017). However, for others, manuals contributed negatively in that it engendered a sense of uncertainty over their own competence, especially regards the assessment process and what to explore. Some thought manuals might impair a more holistic oversight of events if constrained to focus on a narrower cluster of actions that are deemed to promote fidelity to EBP (Sørensen, 2016).

To summarise, much of the recent literature on manuals in social work stems from research into Scandinavian welfare states and suggests some ambiguity over their impact and some ambivalence on the part of practitioners over their usefulness. We suggest therefore, that our comparison of Norway and Wales presents a new and valuable insight into these very different welfare regimes as depicted in the use and value placed by workers on manuals and what this may imply for our understanding of child and family services in both countries.

### **Manuals related to Child and Family Services**

Our focus here on social workers operating for the most part in public service systems in Wales and Norway allows comparison insofar as both systems are organised through local government administrative structures that are accountable to central state authorities and the state-sponsored bodies they may appoint to help regulate practice. Practitioners in both countries are subject to broadly similar processes of professional qualification and registration. In their everyday work they are typically team-based in local offices and community facing. We now consider the manuals deployed in Child and Family Services in Norway and Wales and these are noted below with specific reference to the role or influence of central government.

## Norway

Child and family work in Norway has long been supplemented by evidence-based methods and manuals (Krogh, 2009; Heggen & Dahl, 2017; Ekeland, Bergem & Myklebust, 2019). Even so, the government through the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion has tasked the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir in Norwegian), with oversight of state funded services and specifically with promoting competence in child welfare (Bufdir, 2018). It has recommended to Child and Family Services ‘The Kvello-manual’ which is not strictly evidence-based. It was created by a Norwegian psychologist and bears his name (Kvello, 2010) and offers a guide to mapping with specific checklists. It is used for screening purposes, and the Directorate offers training courses in using the manual. Approximately 60% of Norwegian municipal child welfare services routinely apply this approach and a larger proportion have completed the training (Vis et al., 2015). An evaluation of Kvello (Lauritzen et al., 2017) suggests it is flexible in application. However, there were concerns that it required less depth of detail to be mapped and documented compared to other manuals and did not lead to some overall analytic summation and future use of the findings. The evaluation noted that there are no specific requirements related to formal educational background or competence to employ it, and it is assumed that training particularly by its founder, Kvello, will be sufficient for all recruits (see Lauritzen et al., 2017).

Most of the other (evidence-based) manuals used in Norway are imported from USA. Since the late 1990s, Multisystemic Therapy (MST), Parent Management Training – Oregon (PMTO), and Functional Family Therapy (FFT) have all been applied in Child and Family work (Mørkrid & Christensen, 2007; Krogh, 2009; Martinsen, 2012). The child-oriented Circle of Security (COS) manual is also used (Eng, Rye & Ulvund, 2020). FFT is directed towards youth (11 to 18 years) having relational problems with the family, school, and the local environment. PMTO has parents with children aged 3-12 years as a target group and has similar organising traits as MST. The process of incorporating such programmes with regional and local Child and Family services was generated by the government via the Bufdir. Experts from the University of Oslo (the Norwegian Centre for Child Behavioural Development) were pivotal in the initial process



of adopting the programmes and later through routinely developing, implementing and supervising PMTO and MST (Kristensen, 2022).

The power relations between the state (via Bufdir) and applied child and family work can be illustrated by MST which is used for the treatment of families with youth aged 12-18 years exhibiting serious behavioural difficulties. There exist clear criteria delineating which youth should and should not participate and one must be employed in the Child and Family Service to qualify as an appropriate counsellor. An MST team consists of the counsellor, team-leader, and 3-4 therapists. The team employs an analytical process to define an action plan together with the family that will be implemented and jointly evaluated (Henggeler et al., 2013). Thus, behind the manualised process of the MST is the overarching influence of Bufdir and its determination of specific methods of intervention for specific target groups which by definition impinges upon professional discretion (Strøm & Handegård, 2017; Kristensen, 2022).

## **Wales**

In Wales there seems to be a relative absence of governmental pressure on using manuals in the mainstream child and family services provided by local authorities. However, there are manuals used in ‘neighbouring’ policy fields such as pre-school and school-related settings. These are Incredible Years and Triple P. Incredible Years (IY) is an evidence-based intervention programme for children in the age range 0 to 12 years. The aim is to promote social-emotional learning and IY is used in schools and mental health centres. IY provides specialised programmes for parenting, children, and teachers. IY has been targeted at pre-school children living in disadvantaged areas in Wales (Hutchings et al, 2017).

Triple P – Positive Parenting Program is an evidence-based parenting and family support system to assist the development of the child. It is based upon social learning, cognitive behavioural and developmental theory. Triple P presents itself as being a flexible programme regarding age range and circumstances of the child. A range of professionals across Wales are encouraged to train in and apply Triple P and it enjoys widespread use (Welsh Gov, 2023).

## **Overarching Research Question**

Manuals denote written procedures, mapping tools and guides used in the work with clients, serving purposes like screening, diagnosis, and treatment. We now examine to what extent social workers use manuals, what are the driving forces behind this and how manuals are deemed to impact quality of work. The following research question encapsulates our task:

*What are social workers' attitudes to, and experiences of, manuals in professional practice in Norway and Wales?*

We deployed a survey instrument in both countries which asked participants to report on:

*How often do you use manuals?*

*Why do you use manuals?*

*To what degree do you think that manuals are useful to secure the quality of the work you perform?*

## **Method**

### **Surveying the two workforces**

The study aimed to map the impact of NPM across key domains of practice, manuals being one of several topic areas. A survey was deemed the most appropriate approach in generating data and insights from a large number of social workers in a relatively quick timescale. The use of the survey also allowed standardised information to be collected in each country enabling basic statistical manipulation, cautious generalisation and comparison. In terms of developing the survey architecture and topics we examined methodologically relevant publications on the impact of NPM on social work to help devise and finesse our questions and enhance the reliability of the survey instrument. Of course, the familiar disadvantage of relying solely on survey data is the downplay of contextual and underlying factors that exist beneath survey data. However, some compensation for this weakness (insofar as manuals are concerned) is that we know something of the types of manuals broadly operant at the time of the surveys in both countries.

The survey instrument was first designed and applied in Norway in 2014 (Pithouse, Brookfield & Rees, 2019; Ekeland, Bergem & Myklebust, 2019) and contained some 40 multiple choice questions addressing a range of demographic characteristics and work-related activities and experiences including use of time, knowledge, and competence, decision-making and discretion, evidence-based practice, aims of social work and matters of quality. The instrument, subject to some modification for a Wales readership, was translated into English and Welsh and distributed online in 2017 to all registered social workers across Wales. An online survey was used as participants tend to respond more quickly than to other survey modes and the need for researchers to input data before analysis can begin is removed (Callegaro, Manfreda, &

Vehover, 2015). While the survey in both countries included all social workers we of course focus here only on those based in child and family services.

## **Norway**

The survey was not reported to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data for ethical approval, as the instrument would not identify any individual or place of work. Norway has no national regulatory body to which all workers must register thus a sample was identified from the membership lists of the Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers which enjoys registration of around 70-80% of Norway's social workers. The survey was sent by email (Questback) and targeted at all practitioners (n = 4916) in four counties in western Norway. These localities consist of rural and urban communities. The response rate was 2060 (over 40%). While there is no reason to think that their responses would be different from a national sample, we cannot claim external validity for the respondents as representative of all Norway's practitioners. Most (83%) were women which is consistent with the national gender distribution amongst social workers (Dahle, 2010). The typical social work qualification is at bachelor's degree and a minority of 7.5% have a master's degree, very few have a PhD (see also Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2012). Their average age is mid-forties; some 33% are 50 years or older and 11% are 30 years or younger. Some 48% had been with their present employer for less than five years; 52% for five years or more; 23% for 11 years or more. Notably, some 80% had more than five years' experience of front-line practice. In brief, the workforce would seem to be mainly female, ageing, qualified at graduate level, and a strong majority with several years of direct experience, suggesting a durable and long-serving professional body. There are clear similarities here with the Wales's workforce data.

## **Wales**

A closely translated online version of the Norwegian survey instrument was piloted with registered social workers and academic colleagues in Wales; small adjustments were made to the terminology to clarify and sequence the questions smoothly. Anonymous web links to the survey were distributed by the national registration body, Social Care Wales (SCW), who helped promote the study to the workforce. Ethical approval was provided by a joint academic/SCW panel, who were satisfied that neither the questions nor the anonymised web links would generate data that could identify any individual and this commitment was communicated to participants in the SCW invitation to registrants. Some 5,965 social workers registered by Social Care Wales as employed, were distributed anonymous links to the survey via email and

997 responded. This translates to a response rate of approximately 17%. Comparison between the final survey sample and Social Care Wales membership data revealed no statistically significant differences regarding key demographic variables including gender. Of the respondents, 348 reported that their main field of practice was child and family. While our overall sample could claim strong external validity, we could not be certain this was the case for the much smaller sub-sample of children's workers and, as in Norway, we present our data as non-representative and cross-sectional in time and place.

Like Norway, most of the sample from Wales were female (81%) with an average age of 43–52 and some 11% were 32 or younger. As in Norway, 68% of the workforce were mainly located in local government (Norway 67%), and most were educated and qualified at undergraduate level with many older workers qualified at (former) diploma level. More workers in Wales (11%) than in the Norwegian sample (7.5%) had a master's degree. Most (76%) had over five years of frontline experience, like the 80% in Norway. Some 60% had been with their present employer for much more than 5 years compared to 52% in Norway. In brief, both samples comprise a largely female and ageing workforce which appears to be durable and front-line experienced (with exceptions in some local authorities in Wales, see Care Inspectorate Wales, 2018).

We of course acknowledge the 'historical' nature of our data set which derives from 2014 in Norway and 2017 in Wales. However, we believe the size and richness of the data can still yield valuable insights. We would also observe that in both countries there have been clear continuities in training regimen, legislation, regulation, organisation, and political complexion since the original surveys were undertaken. In Norway the pressure from government continues via the Bufdir, the aim being to enhance quality of family services by reducing 'unwanted variation' in practice by the use of manuals (Bufdir, 2018:4). Such continuity of steering by government permits some modest confidence that our data still resonates with current practice. In any event, relatively little is known about practitioner attitudes toward manuals in both countries and in that context alone the findings provide a valuable datum at a particular point in time and can offer a baseline for future studies in this field.

### **Survey questions:**

*How often do you use manuals?*

This survey question asked participants to select the frequency with which they used manuals. To have a variable with an even distribution in the response categories and to make the interpretation of analyses easier, we constructed a variable with three categories: 1. 'Not relevant at my workplace' or 'Never', 2. 'Sometimes', 3. 'Often' or 'Very often'.

*Why do you use manuals?*

This survey question asked respondents to select all the possible reasons for using manuals. The response options included: 1. I use manuals on my own initiative, 2. I am encouraged to use manuals, 3. I am required to use manuals. This was recoded so that all three categories could be analysed together: 1. Only on my own initiative, 2. I am encouraged to use manuals (+ own initiative), 3. I am required to use manuals (+ own initiative or encouraged).

*To what degree do you think that manuals are useful to secure the quality of the work?*

This survey item originally had five possible response options. For the analyses, we reduced this to three: 1. 'To a very small degree' or 'To a small degree', 2. 'To some degree', 3. 'To a large degree' or 'To a very large degree'.

## **Results**

The results are presented in six tables.

*(Table 1 here)*

10.9% of the social workers across both countries stated that the use of manuals was not relevant at their workplace. However, 21.0% of participants in Wales stated that manuals were not relevant in their workplace compared to 4.0% in Norway. 9.6% of participants across both countries stated they never used manuals, but again the percentage of participants from Wales stating that they never used manuals was much higher than Norway (15.8% in Wales compared to 5.3% in Norway). Some 63.2% of participants in Wales reported using manuals 'Sometimes', 'Often' or 'Very often' compared to 90.7% of participants in Norway. Thus, it appears that manuals are used by both work forces extensively, however, the involvement with manuals is clearly strongest in Norway.

Only respondents using manuals are included in further analyses below: 220 in Wales, 459 in Norway, 679 in total.

*(Table 2 here)*

Table 2 explores where the initiative for using manuals comes from for those participants who reported using them ‘Sometimes’ or ‘Often/Very Often’. The main finding is that both encouragement and requirement leads to more usage. This pattern applies to both Wales and Norway. Only 23% use manuals often or very often when they only do so on their own initiative. This increases to almost 40% when they are also encouraged to use manuals, and to 72% when they are also required to use manuals. This indicates external factors being of considerable influence for the social workers.

*(Table 3 here)*

Table 3 compares how often one uses manuals versus to what degree one thinks manuals are useful to enhance the quality of work. The main finding is that more frequent use of manuals is linked to a stronger belief in manuals as useful for increasing the quality of work. This applies to both Wales and Norway. Of those who believe that the use of manuals increases the quality of work to a very small or minor extent, only 18.8% use manuals often or very often. Of those who believe that the use of manuals increases the quality of work to a large or very large extent, 62% use manuals often or very often.

*(Table 4 here)*

Table 4 considers to what degree one thinks that manuals are useful to enhance the quality of work and main reason for usage. 41% of those who use manuals only on their own initiative believe manuals increase the quality of work to a ‘Large or very large extent’. By comparison, 56% of those who are required to use manuals believe that using manuals increases the quality of their work to a ‘Large or very large extent’. This statistically significant connection is weak, so when splitting Wales and Norway, it is not significant, even if the tendencies in the numbers are the same.

*(Table 5 here)*

Table 5 examines, why social workers use manuals in both countries. The main finding is that a clear majority in Wales state they use manuals only on their own initiative, while Norwegian respondents are to a greater extent both encouraged and required to use manuals. In Wales, 53% of social workers use manuals only on their own initiative, and 22% are required to use manuals. In Norway, 33% use manuals only on their own initiative and 31% are required to.

*(Table 6 here)*

Table 6 examines the split between the two workforces whereby the main finding is that the Norwegian respondents think to a greater extent than respondents in Wales that manuals are useful for enhancing the quality of work. 39% of respondents in Wales reported that the use of manuals enhances the quality of their work to a ‘Large or very large degree’, compared to 51% of respondents in Norway.

## **Discussion**

### *Comparing the two workforces*

Both workforces are engaged in the use of manuals, but mostly in Norway, and Norwegian social workers are more often required to use manuals. The notion of manuals as a ‘requirement’ implies external demands associated with initiatives from national or sub-national authorities and their varying deployment in Norway and Wales. Norway exhibits a comprehensive bureaucratic pressure on using manuals which runs from the government directorate via the Bufdir and its regional networks which promote specific manualised interventions for particular family needs, such as MST and also the Kvello-manual, through municipal Child and Family services.

The governmental urge to influence the behaviour of public service professionals in Norway is by no means a recent phenomenon. It has its roots in a blend of state paternalism and social democratic traditions linked to powerful bureaucratic systems that harnessed professional authority (see Hylland, 2014). For example, Norway’s Directorate of Health has a long history of utilising medical professionals to ‘educate’ the public by overseeing planning, implementation and controlling functions of health policy (Slagstad, 1998). This tradition of paternalism, bureaucracy and professional authority within public services became allied in the 1980s with NPM. Subsequent decades saw increasing evidence of public policy delivered in Norway through NPM techniques that sought to not only educate the public but also myriad practitioners within its sphere of influence. Today in Norway it would not be unreasonable to consider that a wide range of public service professionals are exposed to governmental steering through requirement, direct encouragement or simply the expectation that practitioners will under their own initiative use manuals to guide their practice. This top-down pressure to adopt manualised practices has been internalised by local and regional leaders and front-line workers such as social workers, and contrasts markedly with Wales.

In Wales, we must look for alternative explanations beyond the top-down pressure that obtains in Norway to understand why social workers use manuals. Our data suggests that some 63% of social workers in Wales use manuals even though there is minimal government or regulatory expectation to do so. To explore this further we return to the fundamentals of institutional context whereby we have positioned the use of manuals within the wider nexus of neoliberalism and NPM. Here, a striking aspect of NPM is its isomorphic character which can appear in three forms: coercive, mimetic, and normative (Powell & DiMaggio, 2012) which we outline briefly. The coercive form of NPM directs attention towards government and formal and informal pressure on subordinate organisations (and professions) through regulations and recommendations on methods to be used in professional work. By contrast, the mimetic form applies to governments, leaders, organisational bodies, and professionals whereby they copy other actors' solutions related to managing uncertainty emanating from unclear or insufficient technologies and ambiguous organisational goals: in brief, it feels safer to do what others do within cognate organisational fields. The normative form is distinctive in that it is primarily linked to professional socialisation through educational programmes prior to entering the working life. Thereafter ongoing professional development and occupational networking can facilitate the rapid spread and homogenisation of models of practice (see Røvik, 2023).

Based upon these forms of isomorphism within NPM, we might consider the difference between the Norwegian and Welsh findings regards use of manuals reflects the distinction between a 'top-down' approach in the former and mimetic and normative forms in the latter due, not least, to an absence of governmental pressures. Of course, we might argue that the data derived from the survey category 'one's own initiative' while typical of responses in Wales, is indicative of a more reflexive practitioner (Schön, 1983) who has made up their own mind on use of manuals and not because they were instructed by others, be it local leaders or higher authorities, nor to follow particular tools and occupational trends of the time. An alternative hypothesis might be that 'own initiative' denotes an idiosyncratic and potentially problematic matter. In a pressured work environment in which street level practitioners tend to operate (Lipsky, 2010), such individual selectivity over manuals might well imply risks associated with randomness, eclecticism, and bounded rationality (Simon, 2013).

It is of course also possible that such practices become to varying degrees normative and mimetic within particular groups and networks whilst also 'hidden' within the everyday world of individual case management and unobserved decisions. Whilst conjecture, it is possible that using 'one's own initiative' among the Welsh workers is not accompanied by a (formally)



organised approach to the use of manuals leaving workers less encouraged to discuss this activity in deliberative scrutiny with supervisors (as in Norway and the MST/Kvello manuals). However, our data show that Welsh and Norwegian workers deem their colleagues as important sources of knowledge, so there is likely to exist informal ways for workers to share their ideas and attitudes towards the use of manuals. In short, the survey category ‘one’s own initiative’ reveals how relatively widespread the use of manuals in Wales is, but at the same time illustrates how little we do know about their deployment and workers’ judgements about them.

By contrast, the use of manuals is for many in the Norwegian sample triggered by a mix of requirement and encouragement. We found that a large degree of experience with and/or believing that manuals are useful for improving the quality of work, leads to more use of manuals. It is also a finding that a requirement to use manuals is associated with a belief that usage enhances the quality of work. This might suggest little resistance towards using manuals. It is also a possibility that pressure in the shape of requirements might blur the relationship between manuals and quality of work because some workers might be inclined to associate quality with what one is expected or required to do. In that regard we might speculate whether manuals always operate in conjunction with the needs of clients. At least we cannot take for granted that governmental pressure to apply manuals is invariably aligned to quality of work and with what benefits the clients. The dynamic and uncertain nature of practice will always ‘bump up’ against the formal world of process and manualisation and much will depend on the flexibility (or inflexibility) of the manual. In either instance, manuals are likely to undergo some degree of translation and adaptation as workers in Norway seek some degree of discretion to manage both manuals and the unpredictability of practice (see Heggen & Dahl, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Most social workers in our survey use manuals, but more so in Norway where both encouragement and requirement by the state are strong drivers explaining their high level of application. By contrast, ‘using one’s own initiative’ is the dominant driver for use of manuals in Wales. In both contexts we think it is worthwhile reflecting on the finding that a requirement to use manuals was often associated with the view that they enhance the quality of work. That this readiness to claim manuals improve the quality of work might actually reflect some loss of reflective scrutiny by workers about the sufficiency of manuals as a practice aide is a question for future research, our data offers few clues in that regard. It might well be that some manuals operate as a sort of ‘institutional fad’ (Best 2006), promising much improvement but failing to deliver, falling into disuse and only superficially engaged with at the time. Future research

might examine if social workers uncritically buy into such novelties, or if they adapt their practice in line with all or selective elements of a recommended or required manual.

We also reflect on ideas about how NPM shapes activity and what this may say about our own findings at a national level. NPM exerts influence vertically and horizontally. Vertically in the sense of a comprehensive bureaucratic pressure within a nation state and subsequently in specific policy fields. Horizontally in that both NPM and EBP as manifested in manuals are likely to migrate over time and space (Bastian, 2017), much like other processes of globalisation (Eriksen, 2014) whereby other countries adopt similar policies and practices. Globalisation makes diffusion a significant factor in the continuing expansion of NPM, EBP and the manualisation of social work.

This raises interesting questions for future research about how we might understand differences in types of welfare regime. Wales, devolved from but funded through the neo-liberal framework of UK politics where NPM and EBP are much vaunted, is very much positioned in a residualist and targeted welfare service for families. Yet there has been no intervention in the knowledge base of social workers from governmental sources that might require the use of manuals. By comparison, the more generous family social work services in social democratic Norway evidence a clear pressure over using manuals. It appears that this also applies to Denmark (Lyneborg & Damgaard, 2018; Sørensen, 2016) and Sweden (Jacobsson & Meeuwisse, 2020; Skillmark & Denvall, 2018). Coercion to apply manuals in Children and Family Services seem to be a striking feature of the social democratic welfare states in Scandinavia. Not so in Wales or neighbouring England. Such differences remind us of the importance not to assume a type of welfare regime will somehow predict the occupational experience of front-line public service workers regarding discretion, autonomy, and the control of work.

Indeed, social workers as a global occupational entity are deemed to be primarily guided by universal values and ethics (IFSW 2014) internal to the professional mission and thereby assumed to be sceptical and resistant towards an externally imposed technocratic manualisation of practice. Our data suggests however that social workers are partially ambivalent, indifferent, or favourable to manualisation. Future research on the formal and informal use of manuals is much needed to detect how family social work unfolds in practice and how future generations of social workers will experience and adapt to these steering initiatives that stem from the globalising order of NPM and EBP.

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