

People-processing in youth welfare services: A cross-sectional approach

Sanna Aaltonen ^{a,*}, Oona Lipponen ^a, Noora Hästbacka ^b, Sakari Karvonen ^b

^a University of Eastern Finland, Finland

^b Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Multi-professional
People-processing
Professionals
Youth welfare services

ABSTRACT

This paper holistically sheds light on youth welfare services, drawing upon interviews with professionals working in youth, health, social and employment services and investigating their institutionally embedded professional practices and shared features. The 38 individual and group interviews with 73 professionals were analysed thematically to determine their priorities in their work and identify what is done with young people seeking help from their services. First, the services were identified as having four functions: (1) guidance, (2) authoritative decision-making, (3) psychosocial support and (4) everyday support. These functions are prioritised differently in the services, but the services are not limited to a single service feature. This typology demonstrates that young people often need more than one form of support for diverse aspects of their lives. Second, the interviews highlighted the working method of people-processing, understood as categorising, assessing and guiding clients to other services. While earlier research has understood people-processing as a feature of specific services or organisations, it is a central method in all services. The service system's high client volumes and requirements for efficiency make it ill-suited to long-term, relationship-based work, and there is an incentive to keep young people moving on a service pathway and process them forward.

1. Introduction

Administrators and policy-makers define young people and young adults as those situated between the statuses of dependent children and independent adults and having specific, age-based needs, rights and responsibilities (Aaltonen et al., 2016; Antonucci et al., 2014; Coles, 1995). In universalistic transition regimes (Walther, 2006) such as that of Finland, young people are supported by both universal services and youth-oriented public welfare services tailored for those in vulnerable positions (e.g. Kallinen & Häikiö, 2021). Each service or service entity is specialised to prevent and deal with a social problem, such as poor mental health, substance abuse and unemployment. Additionally, each type of public service is regulated by legislation that sets out particular rights and responsibilities of both professionals and clients. Despite differences between the services, they all identify youth as 'a potential resource for the future of society' (Walther, 2006, p. 127). Thus, they share the aim of helping young people enhance their quality of life and empowering them to find pathways to education and employment.

Concern regarding the increasing pressure related to life-course transitions as well as the growing number of young people experiencing mental health disorders or categorised as 'not in education,

employment or training' (NEET) (OECD, 2023) has further highlighted the importance of youth policies and youth-friendly services (e.g. Helve, 2014). Services are understood as key elements contributing to social sustainability by addressing the marginalisation of young people and nurturing them towards independent active citizenship. Societal concern over the effects of financial crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change on young people's well-being, education and employment has inspired attempts to improve access to mental health services particularly. The common trend in this developing work has been to adopt integrated, multidisciplinary approaches to tackle the complicated situations in young people's lives (e.g. Joronen et al., 2018; Turba et al., 2019), so organisers of health and social services are expected to coordinate clients' social and health services as packages or pathways, which requires deepening professionals' knowledge of the service system and developing cooperative practices between individual services (Timperi, 2022). This trend towards multidisciplinary pathways calls for critical exploration of cross-sectoral co-operation.

This paper aims to acknowledge these services' shared aims and shed light on multidisciplinary youth welfare services from the professionals' point of view in a more holistic way than would be possible by focusing on a single service. While there are numerous definitions of *youth welfare*

* Corresponding author at: University of Eastern Finland, Department of Social Sciences, Yliopistoranta 8 E, PL1627, 70211 Kuopio, Finland.

E-mail address: sanna.aaltonen@uef.fi (S. Aaltonen).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.108027>

Received 22 December 2023; Received in revised form 14 November 2024; Accepted 15 November 2024

Available online 22 November 2024

0190-7409/© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

services, the term in this paper refers to age-related, youth-specific employment, health and social services as well as youth work. While in some countries youth work may operate under social work, in the Finnish context, youth work including outreach youth work is a separate statutory service organised by municipalities (see also Kauppinen et al., 2024; Regional State Administrative Agency, 2023). There may be similarities in the forms of social work and (outreach) youth work in Finland, but the administrative power as well as the professional identity, and training differ. Drawing upon interview data produced among professionals of these key welfare services, we combine perspectives adopted from social policy studies and sociologically informed youth studies to deepen the understanding of specific functions and working methods of welfare services when dealing with young clients. This aim may be formulated as a question: what kind of institutional and multi-professional processes are set in motion when a young person seeks help from services? After providing an analytical overview of the functions of welfare services, our focus turns to service guidance as highlighted in the interviews, which we analyse as an institutional technology conceptualised by Yeheskel Hasenfeld (1972) as *people-processing*. Our study's results demonstrate how processing technologies—i.e. classifying, assessing and controlling access to other services—take particular forms in youth-specific welfare services.

2. Professionals between policies and clients

The frontline employees of youth welfare services comprise a diverse group of professionals in terms of educational qualifications and level of professionalisation and administrative power. They have in common that they all must balance between institutional bureaucracies and clients' needs. Michael Lipsky (2010) has conceptualised professionals as 'street-level bureaucrats', meaning that, while their work is based on boundaries set by public policies, they also exercise discretion and make choices and judgements of people in their daily encounters. They enforce youth, health and social policies by applying general rules in specific cases, but they also have a policy-making role and an effect on policies through their practices (see Durose, 2011; Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015). Because the degree of bureaucracy varies from one service to another, however, street-level bureaucrats are guided by different *institutional logics* emanating from basic societal tasks of established institutions. These logics can also be defined as organisational principles, ethics and service-specific symbolic and material practices that guide professionals in their work. The institutional logics link professionals' working methods and the institutional rules that shape the lives of young adults in vulnerable positions. (Oterholm & Paulsen, 2018; Thornton et al., 2012; Turba et al., 2019.) In multidisciplinary environments competing logics may create tensions between institutions or create a barrier for co-operation. Commitment to a multidisciplinary approach calls for navigating the complexities for example by developing mechanisms of collaboration that support the co-existence of separate professional identities and different logics (Reay & Hinings, 2009).

Another commonality among services focusing on youth welfare is that they all can be labelled as 'human service organisations' following Hasenfeld's (1992) conceptualisation. Common features of such organisations are that their aim of protecting and promoting well-being upholds ideologies of moral good and emancipation; that they must seek legitimacy for their work from interest groups that control resources; that their services are delivered in client-staff relations that involve emotional work; and that their services tend to be gendered (Hasenfeld, 1992, p. 51). Beyond these common features, various organisational circumstances and working methods distinguish these services from one another. To illustrate distinct types of service, Hasenfeld (1992) identifies three ideal-typical institutional technologies used by human service organisations: people-processing, people-sustaining and people-changing. People-processing involves assessing and labelling individuals in a relatively short-term professional-client relationship and managing the relocation of the client in a new organisation

and service provider. People-sustaining describes support or intervention that does not aim to fundamentally alter an individual, whereas people-changing organisations or activities aim to fundamentally alter an individual's characteristics and behaviour. Examples of people-processing institutions include diagnostic clinics or employment placement offices that do not aim to change people per se but 'shape a person's life by controlling his access to a wide range of social settings through the public status they confer' (Hasenfeld, 1972, p. 256). People-sustaining can occur in social work or housing service, whereas people-changing organisations include schools or correctional institutions (Gibson et al., 2018; Stranz et al., 2016). One of the distinct differences between people-processing and people-changing organisations according to Hasenfeld (1972) is the locus of technology: people-changing may take place within one organization while processing involves working across organizational boundaries. This means that people-processing organisations have to develop systematic links with external recipient organisations which in itself orientates them to adopt a multidisciplinary approach.

Previous research has particularly applied the notion of people-processing in studies using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Riitta-Liisa Kinni (2014) applied the concept in a qualitative case study of a multi-professional team in a hospital, focusing on how the social identity of elderly clients was processed by categorising them and how decisions dictated by health care professionals marginalised the knowledge of social workers and patients. Hugo Stranz and colleagues (2016) used data from questionnaires answered by social service case workers to study how clients were filtered and processed in three domains: child welfare, social assistance and substance abuse treatment. According to the researchers, the low external and high internal referrals indicated a silo mentality in specialised services. Alexes Harris (2008) drew upon observational and interview data to study juvenile courts, where judges determine whether young people will be sentenced in the juvenile justice system (labelled as minors) or sentenced in the regular criminal justice system as adults. This entailed labelling some offenders as 'chronic', 'serious' and a threat to society (see also Hasenfeld & Cheung, 1985; Shiff, 2021; van der Leun, 2006).

However, it is essential to bear in mind that the three technologies and organisations employing them overlap to some extent; for example, processing functions, such as classifying clients, take place in institutions understood as ones changing people. This is illustrated by Katherine Gibson and colleagues (2018), who point out that child welfare systems aim to both change and process children, young people and families that become their clients.

Child welfare system are people changing in that they are legally and socially charged with creating changes in the lives of children and families through various interventions to improve family functioning and (or) ensure child safety and stability. At the same time, child welfare systems are legally accountable for *processing* [italics original] these children and families as they move through the system. Youth and families are classified, monitored and assessed based on data gathered about them through various bureaucratic, legal and diagnostic practices. (Gibson et al., 2018, 43)

Gibson and colleagues (2018) investigate the tensions between these institutional aims or technologies, and this perspective offers a more nuanced approach than simply pairing services with single technologies.

While earlier studies have focused on particular systems or services, we adopt a cross-sectional perspective on services tailored to enhance the welfare of young people and young adults. Furthermore, although the institutional technologies refer to organisational characteristics rather than the discretionary activity of an individual employee, we suggest that Lipsky's notion of street-level bureaucracy offers an important backdrop for understanding them, as all technologies are linked to practical day-to-day decisions made by professionals. Thus, a focus on institutional technologies (especially people-processing) and institutional logics offers a way that enables considering the specific

attributes and practices of services with their shared features as well as professional agency and bureaucratic rules.

3. Data and methods

This paper is based on a research project entitled ‘*Youth services at crossroads – mapping the challenges of youth health and social services in wellbeing services counties*’. The project aimed to examine the effects of a recent major health and social services reform that transferred the organisation of social and health services from individual municipalities (N = 309) to (larger) regional administrative entities called Wellbeing Services Counties (N = 21) and potentially created an administrative gap to youth-work based services, which continued being organised by municipalities. However, this paper does not focus on the reform as such or on the regional differences described below.

The specific focus on multi- and interdisciplinary practices in the reorganised youth sector guided the present study’s data collection, which involved individual and focus group discussions with professionals in youth welfare services in two Wellbeing Services Counties that were chosen to represent a diversity of circumstances. The Wellbeing Services County of Vantaa-Kerava in the Helsinki metropolitan area and that of Northern Savo in Eastern Finland represent very different regions. People living in densely populated Vantaa-Kerava (two municipalities) are among the healthiest in Finland, whereas the unhealthiest people in the entire country live in Northern Savo (19 municipalities), a county with long distances, a sparse population and big differences between municipalities. (Hästbacka et al., 2023.).

3.1. Data collection

The original aim of the data collection was to capture the experiences of frontline professionals working with 16- to 25-year-olds in three organisational fields: youth, health and social services. However, to obtain a broader picture of the range of services available and tailored for young adults, the recruitment was extended to other relevant services, including professionals working in One-Stop Guidance Centres (OSGCs), employment services and rehabilitative workshops. Some professionals worked between these organisational and administrative fields, thus challenging the reputation of strictly siloed services and

fulfilling the aim of integrating services and advancing a multidisciplinary approach. All the services can be categorised as public welfare services, but they are regulated by sectoral legislation, and organised by different parties as indicated in the following table (Table 1).

The study covered a number of key welfare services, but it is not exhaustive. The Finnish service system is extensive and complex, and important services for young people such as child protection were excluded from the study. Additionally, Kela, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, which provides basic support to everyone covered by the Finnish social security system was left out because it operates almost solely online.

The data collection started by obtaining research permits from the Wellbeing Services Counties and municipalities and by contacting potential interviewees. The interviews took place in February–May 2023 and were conducted by Noora Hästbacka in Vantaa-Kerava and by Oona Lipponen in Northern Savo. Altogether, 38 single or group interviews were conducted with 73 mostly female participants, including youth workers, employment coaches, service coordinators, social workers, social counsellors and nurses, some in managerial positions. The professionals worked mainly in services in which young people could contact them directly. In many of the services, however, the professional-client relationships were generally started through another professional. Some services were restricted to only those assessed to be entitled to them.

The professionals discussed young peoples’ position in services with the help of a vignette, a fictional narrative drafted jointly by the authors. Previous research has used vignettes, for example, to examine the practices, service processes and related experiences of professionals in social and health care (Kontrimiene et al., 2021). Our aim in using a vignette was to enable the interviewees to share their views and perceptions in a less personal manner and facilitate the discussion of sensitive and complex issues without fear of compromising professional confidentiality (Przeperski & Taylor, 2022). Further, the vignette established a shared understanding of the kinds of situations and challenges we were interested in. After introductory questions, the interviewees were presented with the following vignette and asked to comment on how to start working with its particular client.

Vignette: A young person in the process of becoming independent has been referred to your service. They have completed primary

Table 1

Description of youth welfare services and professionals included in the study.

Service	Legislation governing the service	Responsibility for organising services	Key content of the service	Occupational titles of interviewees	Number of interviews/interviewees
One-Stop Guidance Centres (OSGC)	Not a statutory service	Municipality	Service guidance	Service coordinator, project worker	3/5
Employment services	Act on the organisation of employment services 380/2023 Act on Multidisciplinary Joint Employment Services 1369/2014	Municipality	Guidance to training and employment, service guidance to promote employability, monitoring the implementation of the obligation to seek employment.	Employment coach	2/10
Outreach youth work	Youth Act 1285/2016	Municipality	Service guidance, practical help to access services, support in everyday life.	Outreach youth worker	11/20
Youth social work and child welfare aftercare	Social welfare act 1301/2014 Child welfare act 417/2007	Wellbeing Services County	Service needs assessments, client plans, administrative decisions regarding social services, guidance and counselling, networking and coordinating services.	Social worker, social counsellor	8/16
Mental health services and substance abuse treatment	Social welfare act 1301/2014 Health care act 1326/2010	Wellbeing Services County	Psychosocial support, counselling and therapeutic interventions.	MD, nurse, psychologist, social worker, social counsellor	9/13
Rehabilitative workshops (youth workshops, social rehabilitation, rehabilitative work activities)	Youth Act 1285/2016 Social Welfare Act 1301/2014 Act on Rehabilitation Work Activities 189/2001	Either by municipality or a Wellbeing Services County	Support for life management, social skills and functional capacities, promotion of study ability and work ability.	Workshop instructor, personal coach	5/9

school but not secondary education and are not in employment. The young person says that they have mental health challenges, which manifest themselves in depression, anxiety and isolation. The young person experiences loneliness. They spend a lot of time at home and are not involved in activities outside the home. The young person has challenges in everyday life, such as finding a daily rhythm and managing things. The young person is also concerned about their financial situation, as they have difficulty paying bills on time and having enough money for essential expenses. (Translated from Finnish)

Although we assumed that the fictional character would be familiar to the interviewees, the characterisation appeared to be exceptionally fitting and at the same time far from an easy or quick case.

Youth worker 1: [T]his is really like ... I don't know what the right term is, but ...

Youth worker 2: An archetype for us. [laughs]

YW1: Yeah. I mean, I feel that this is the person who comes to us again and again as a different case.

YW2: It's just the same character [laughs]

YW1: Yes. I think this is a kind of client case that could be added in our orientation material.

While the description served as a believable starting point, the professionals did not restrict their reflections to the young person in the vignette but quickly proceeded to talk about their clients and services on a general level. Although the rationale for using the vignette was to conduct interviews with a diverse group in a relatively standardized way, we did not want to focus too narrowly on the specific case it described. Instead, the vignette successfully oriented the discussion during the interviews. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed interviewees to explore different aspects of their work with young people. Additionally, it was often difficult to distinguish between descriptions of established practices and speculations about how they might handle the person introduced in the vignette.

3.2. Analysis

The reactions to and discussions of the vignette served as a starting point for our analysis, but relevant discussions in other parts of the interviews have equally been used. As the data consist of interviews, we were more interested in the professionals' views and understanding of the processing functions than in the exact procedures. The data were analysed by using both data-driven and theory-driven approaches. First, the interviews were analysed thematically by focusing on how professionals described the content of a service; their main tasks and roles within both the service system and the young person's life; and what they considered to be the main priorities of their work. Second, we used the notion of people-processing as a sensitising concept and an analytical lens to comprehend the emphasis in the interviews on the importance of guiding and referring clients to other services.

4. Results

Our results are presented in two parts that both adopt a cross-sectoral approach to youth welfare services. First, we provide an overview of the variety of youth welfare services and professionals' understanding of their tasks and aims within the service system (see Hästbacka et al., 2023). Second, we describe the diverse elements of people-processing to illustrate the specificities of this institutional technology in the context of youth welfare services.

4.1. Typology of functions of youth welfare services

The overall function of all welfare services is to promote clients' welfare, but, to consider specific service attributes and their shared

features, we developed a typology that groups the functions of youth welfare services according to the main areas of support. This typology was a result of inductive analysis that aimed to go beyond sector-specific descriptions. The four categories of functions are (1) guidance, (2) authoritative decision-making, (3) psychosocial support and (4) everyday support. These functions reflect different types of institutional or public sector logic, understood as sets of sectoral legal norms, organisational ethos, professional knowledge, goals and practices that do not determine but inform and structure the work and discretion of professionals. If the institutional technologies were placed in the figure, people-processing would be more towards the top of the figure, and people-changing at the bottom. Notably, however, while functions are highlighted differently in various services, services are not limited to a single service approach. Thus, Fig. 1 illustrates not a typology of services per se but a typology of functions. The two axes indicate whether the functions happen in one-off or recurring service encounters and whether the encounters can be characterised as focusing on relations between professionals and young people or on matters awaiting resolution.

The typology of functions is an analytical tool that clarifies the various aims of the service sector but acknowledges their interlinked and overlapping character. While individual services do not necessarily fall neatly into a single category, it is possible to see links between functions and individual services.

The guidance function is strong in both the walk-in service OSGC and outreach youth work that emphasise a youth-friendly approach in a relaxed atmosphere. As the name One-Stop Guidance Centre indicates, OSGCs' key task is to guide young people to appointments with professionals either in their own offices or on the OSGC premises, where some professionals are occasionally on call. Some OSGCs also offer optional low-threshold in-house group activities for those considered as socially withdrawn, socially nervous or distressed. Outreach youth work focuses on issues such as loneliness and life management, but, according to the Youth Act (1285/2016), their important task is to help young people access other services at the right time and apply for benefits to which they are entitled.¹

Authoritative decision-making is done by public servants who, unlike youth workers, have the power to decide on eligibility for benefits and regulate access to various services and interventions. Professionals

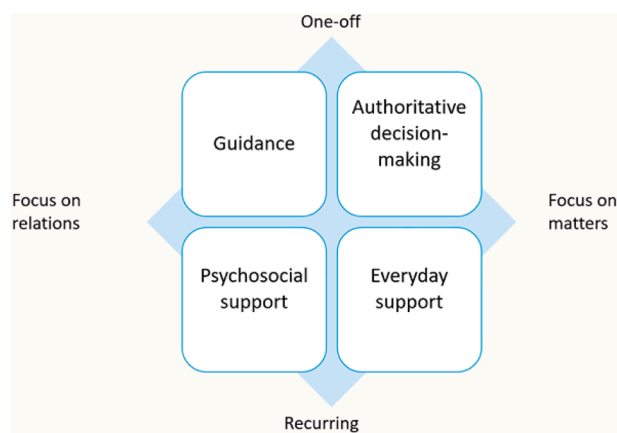


Fig. 1. Typology of functions.

¹ Youth Act, § 10: 'The role of outreach youth work is to reach young people in need of support and help them to access services and other support to promote their growth, independence, social inclusion and other life management skills as well as their access to education, training and the labour market. Youth work is based on voluntary participation by and cooperation with the young person'.

such as those working in employment services and social work as well as certain nurses and doctors have the important function of guiding and supporting young clients in their specific fields, but one of their distinguishing features is their administrative power to write official referrals, make bureaucratic decisions about services and benefits for the client and act as gatekeepers to further services. Therefore, although they may be somewhat distant from young people's daily lives and rarely meet them due to large caseloads and insufficient resources, they have a significant impact on their material situation and societal position.

All the professionals mentioned a readiness to offer some sort of psychosocial support, but the ones dedicated to it were those working in social and health services, whose main role is to work with young people at regular intervals in a structured, relationship-based manner. These services include mental health services, substance abuse services and social counselling. For example, mental health services provide young people with counselling and therapeutic interventions as well as family work aimed at bringing about change or stabilising a situation in crisis.

Likewise, most services provide support aimed at building a young person's functional capacity and life skills. However, youth workshops and, sometimes, outreach youth work are services in which professionals are heavily involved in working with the client in their daily lives as 'close workers', offering functional everyday support for a set amount of time. Apart from the optional group activities offered by substance abuse and mental health services and some OSGCs, youth workshops offered the only opportunity for young people to spend time with peers in similar circumstances. Thus, social empowerment also embraces relations, but at its core is a social strengthening that enables a young person to lead an independent life.

4.2. Forms of People-Processing

To answer the question of the institutional and multiprofessional processes that are set in motion when young people enter welfare services, we turn from functions to the more concrete working methods or institutional technologies described by professionals. While we are aware of the interconnected nature of people-sustaining, people-changing and people-processing and recognise that their use is not restricted to specific services, we prioritise people-processing as our analytical focus and show how it is employed in the context of youth welfare services. The rationale behind this is that people-processing was highlighted throughout the interviews, not merely when discussing guidance and authoritative decision-making, which one could argue best match the notion of people-processing. While the emphasis can be partly explained by how we framed the interviews (i.e. by asking interviewees how they would proceed with the young person in the vignette), we suggest that a great deal of the work in welfare services focuses on processing young people, sometimes at the expense of other working methods. In the sections that follow, we address the basic characteristics of people-processing—classifying, assessing and referring to other services—and illuminate their inner tensions and youth-specific features.

4.2.1. Age limits as the basis for classifying

After reading the vignette, many of the professionals asked the interviewer to specify the subject's age.² Knowing the age was vital, because there are several institutional age limits that determine the rights and responsibilities of young people seeking services. Along with service needs, age defines in which service people-processing begins. All services except OSGCs are regulated by legislation, and each approaches young people from the perspective of sectoral legislation, which defines clients' age-specific rights and obligations. The age limits are based on

the understanding of youth as a life stage at which people have specific needs and responsibilities on their transition into adulthood. An important age limit is that compulsory education ends at age 18 (Compulsory Education Act, 1214/2020), which is also the age of majority. This means that all young people under that age and without a degree from upper secondary education are automatically registered in the compulsory school attendance monitoring and supervision service and directed to an educational institution.

Apart from the age of majority, other age limits within the services vary. A distinctively Finnish framework law, the Youth Act (1285/2016), defines a young person as one under 29 years of age, meaning that all targeted youth services provided by municipalities, such as outreach youth work, are at their disposal. However, age limits were not as important to the youth services that lacked administrative power or did not keep a register of their clients. As an OSGC professional noted, 'We won't ask ID from people, of course; we offer help when needed'. While the Youth Act has a broad understanding of youth, other sectors restrict their youth-specific services to younger groups. Employment services consider young people as being 18–24 years of age, and if they are unemployed and do not have vocational qualifications, they are obliged to apply for a place of study to be entitled for unemployment benefits. In the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014), a young person denotes all 18- to 24-year-olds, who are considered a special group of clients and can be offered youth-specific social services. Youth psychiatric services are usually meant for young people up to 18 years of age, but the Health Care Act (1326/2010) aims to guarantee quick access to mental health services to persons under the age of 23.

Age serves as a relatively clear, impersonal basis for classifying young people according to their responsibilities and assumed needs. From the professionals' point of view, it may in some cases facilitate the otherwise complicated division of work between services. Although the various effects of categorising young clients according to age was not widely discussed, it was mentioned that, in some services, crossing the age limit results in being transferred from one service sector and professional to another, which may be a difficult change for a young adult and torpedo the progress made so far.

4.2.2. Recurring assessments

Assessments are a key means of regulating service admission and referral to ensure that young people receive timely, adequate help and that services are sufficiently resourced; the professionals stated that the first step in the vignette case would be to assess the young person's life situation. However, the interviewees described very different methods of assessing their clients' needs and conditions: most assessments were quite informal, but some professionals used structured tools to evaluate the situation and service needs. Compared to age-based categorisation, assessment required more discretion as well as meeting the client.

In youth work-related services, OSGC coordinators and youth workers emphasised that young people are the experts on their own situation, so the work's starting point is their wishes. Many interviewees mentioned discovering a young person's situation gradually and patiently, as young people may not be able to articulate all their needs in one visit. This approach, which respected the pace and preferences of a young person, was time consuming but necessary so as 'not to accidentally push too hard and drive them away'. The youth workers framed their approach as non-bureaucratic and argued that this was one aspect that distinguished theirs from social work.

Youth worker: Usually, the starting point in outreach youth work is that the young person will talk about their issues to the extent that they want to. [...] Perhaps the difference to social work is that we base the understanding of service needs on the young person's own narrative, while in social work the assessment is more structured, and perhaps more attention is paid to things that the young person does not voluntarily tell. We are positioned in the early stages of services.

² Notably, no one asked about the fictional character's gender or ethnic background.

Obviously, informal discussions also took place in other services, but the public servants responsible for authoritative decision-making used more structured assessments that categorised clients according to their service needs. In the employment services, the starting point was determining why the young person was not employed. In addition to (or instead of) job searching, the basic things to go through with the client were health, finances and housing issues. In multi-professional services within employment services, clients' life situations were usually very complicated, which is why there was a team of professionals from services such as health care, treatment of substance abuse, youth work, social work and the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, which also provides basic social assistance. The professionals in employment services did assessments of work readiness and classified clients into three groups: the independent ones ready for the job market, those needing intensified services and those requiring multi-professional services, in which a team provided long-term unemployed clients (i.e. unemployed for 300 days) with social, health and rehabilitation services. To qualify for these services, clients had to commit to accepting the given rehabilitation, but they were not obliged to apply for jobs as in other types of employment services. This requisite commitment to being a client caused some problems in the services, and clients were sometimes reassessed and moved between services. The professionals were legally obliged to conduct continual assessment and people-processing by enacting waiting periods or denying labour market subsidies if clients failed to fulfil their obligations.³ This was considered an emotionally burdensome part of their work and difficult to reconcile with their aim of supporting and acting for the clients' best interests, which involved even looking for loopholes to ease clients' demanding situations and dealing with overly bureaucratic language and complicated processes.

Employment coach: [mimics talking to a client] 'So *unfortunately* I'm going to have to sort this out and *unfortunately* someone else is going to have to decide. *Unfortunately*'. I use the word *unfortunately* too much. Sometimes it feels so awful to hold your post.

In social work, the professionals conducted structured social service need assessments of young people's overall situation as a basis for creating a social service plan and making decisions about suitable services. This assessment evaluated their ability to function, situation at school or work, financial and housing situation, social network, benefits and services received as well as the young person's own wishes. However, as child welfare aftercare⁴ is a subjective right for certain young people, its initiation does not require a formal social service assessment as in general social work. In aftercare, therefore, work can begin in a slightly more informal manner by getting to know young people and their needs.

In social work, the professionals also assessed whether the young person belongs to the category of 'a client with complex needs',⁵ in which case their 'personal worker' must be a social worker with a master's degree instead of a social counsellor who has a more practice-oriented degree from a university of applied sciences. Assessing the need for special support requires considerable exercise of discretion on the social worker's part, but the case in the vignette, for example, would have qualified as needing multiple support (understood as special support).

³ Receiving the labour market subsidy depends on whether clients fulfil their obligations when applying for training (compulsory for people under 25) or work. If not, their source of income will be the last-resort financial assistance.

⁴ When a young person is no longer in foster care, they are entitled for aftercare that may continue until the young person turns 25.

⁵ The *Social Welfare Act (2014)* defines a client with complex needs as 'a person who has specific difficulties in seeking and receiving the social and health services they require due to cognitive or psychological impairment or illness, substance abuse issues, or other dependency behaviors, the need for multiple simultaneous support, or similar reasons'.

Lead social worker: We don't have guidelines [on how to assess complex needs], and the need for special support isn't always very clear. And we might not always be in complete agreement about it, which occasionally sparks discussions.

The professionals in mental health and substance abuse services started by assessing young people's overall situation and evaluating their well-being. The assessment included housing, relationships, school attendance, daily routine and other basics, such as sleeping, eating and drinking. Mood and anxiety were usually also assessed using structured assessment and screening tools to classify young people according to their situation. People-processing elements in mental health services are particularly evident in the concept of tiers of care and the classification of young people according to symptom severity as having mild, moderate or severe mental disorders (psychiatric rating scale). This classification is based on the medical diagnostic classification system, which assesses, among other things, the symptoms' number, duration, intensity and impact on functioning, which informs decisions on treatment lines. What seemed to cause friction in the mental health services was that the structures did not meet the needs of young people. The professionals were concerned that available services were initially delayed and were too short and that doctors' posts were vacant, so young people were not getting the needed psychiatric services. This situation put a strain on staff, as it led to constant negotiations and disputes about which service a young person 'belonged' to, and boundaries moved according to the staff resources available in each service.

Finally, the assessment in youth workshops aiming at social empowerment started by drafting a young person's work plan, weekly schedule and defining aims. Assessments continued by monitoring how the person fared in fulfilling the personal work plan.

4.2.3. Gatekeeping and nudging to further services

Most classifying and assessing processes are not performed for their own sake but to determine what kinds of support are needed and the best fit between clients' needs and available services. An embedded multi-disciplinary approach in services targeting young people is reflected in the *Youth Act (1285/2016)* and in social and health care legislation. This approach calls for a shared understanding of a multifaceted service provision and a readiness to cooperate with other professionals within and across service sectors. Reactions to the vignette included a diverse range of suggestions on which services to contact and how to process the client forward, but professionals are in different positions regarding the power to refer clients to other sources of support, and there is also variation as to whether the professional focus is on strict gatekeeping or on nudging to services. Further, in the context of services included in this study, many referrals are given not to specialised services but to others that the client must contact directly.

A key aim of OSGC and outreach youth work was finding 'the right service at the right time' for young people, and, as they did not have any administrative power to write official referrals, the professionals used other means to facilitate young people's access to services. The potential to rely on personal contacts with other service providers appeared to be an important way of compensating for a lack of official power: 'There are people I know at the [rehabilitation clinic] [laughs], so I could send them a message and use my personal networks to approach them'. One interviewee mentioned that it was quicker to proceed through the same routes as the client would take and 'bring our authoritative request to expedite the process' instead of relying on inter-authority cooperation. There appeared to be variation regarding the professionals' role: in some places, young people were given information on the services and expected to contact them independently, whereas other places actively nudged clients towards other services. If young people asked for help, youth workers also served as drivers or advocates by accompanying clients to a service counter or making phone calls with them. In one group interview, youth workers expressed that, in mental health services, they worked as 'megaphones' for young people to demand

services, expedite the process or help them articulate their needs. The interviewees emphasised being elementary pieces in the service system, as they provided understandable guidance to young people regarding the needed services to which they were entitled. This included promoting young peoples' cases by finding alternative approaches and 'peculiar solutions' hidden in the system.

Youth worker: It seems a bit like playing a card game where you are given the rules, but then you have to understand that the rules do not prohibit certain things. And those are really the things that will win you the card game.

Although they helped clients with employment, health and social-related issues, these professionals' foremost contribution could be seen as performing people-sustaining and people-changing functions, yet they were involved in people-processing by translating young clients' needs into a language understood by the bureaucratic system to access the needed services. Thus, they had adopted a multidisciplinary approach and guided or referred their clients to other services. Due to the service system's specific obligation that young people under the age of 25 participate in education or employment, young people were often guided to become a client of employment services. Social workers mentioned that they helped young people in many ways, but working with additional networks was often needed to support the clients holistically. However, comments suggesting that 'social workers do not speak the same language as health care professionals' and vice versa highlighted the sectoral differences that complicated people-processing. In one social work unit, a nurse as a professional from the health sector was hired to assist social workers with people-processing, enabling young individuals to access health care services. Nurses also worked in the employment services to assess the health status of young people and, if necessary, refer them to health services. Some of the interviewees described the collaboration between social work and health care as challenging due to the different tempos of service: social work was seen as involving lengthy processes, whereas health care was assumed to operate on a faster timeline.

The professionals in employment services worked in multi-professional teams but were aware of other services: 'You could say that we have a huge selection, and if the young person is at all inclined to accept help, then yes, this system has got it'. Consequently, the professionals commented that it was extremely difficult to keep track of all the services and projects.

Services and professionals offering psychosocial and everyday support represented those more focused on people-sustaining and people-changing and were places to which young people were referred, but clients were processed further to other services if needs arose. The mental health service units included in the study were situated between universal primary care and specialised health care. Thus, in some services, the screening criterion was that a young person had first received help from universal primary care, such as student welfare services. Mental health services struggled with limited resources, and their intake was regulated by screening those who could most benefit from treatment. Another way of regulating intake was assessing the capacity of other services to provide support to the young person. Depending on the situation, mental health services clients were referred to school health services, social services, psychiatric services or outsourced support services.

Other professionals also described mental health services as a bottleneck in people-processing. The vignette's allusion to mental health concerns caught the eye of interviewees, who often suggested that finding help with mental health issues is a good place to start. This was usually done by helping the young person contact the health centre or convincing them to visit one, sometimes accompanied by a professional. The professionals quickly turned their attention from the fictional case to their clientele, and their widely shared understanding was that many if not all of their clients needed help with mental health issues. As one of the employment coaches mentioned, 'I had no idea about the [mental

health] situation before I came to work here. But since then, my eyes have opened to the fact that the situation is, frankly speaking, quite shocking'. Many of those who mentioned mental health said in the same breath that the resources appeared inadequate; often, young people were being processed to long queues instead of treatment. The procedure to get mental health services was described as complicated, time consuming and frustrating for both the professionals and the clients. Due to the long queues particularly, the youth workers felt that they had to cover up for inadequate mental health services, which was not an ideal situation without proper tools and expertise.

The professionals working in mental health services shared the concerns of other professionals described above; the queues were long partly because Wellbeing Services Counties struggled to fill posts of doctors and nurses. Many professionals were frustrated with the friction in care chains. Some areas had many low-threshold services and actors, which meant that 'young people can churn between low-threshold services like this for ages'. Although preventive and low-threshold services were appreciated, there was a pressing need for more intensive services.

Nurse: There is no service for these people, and sometimes I feel that it is just terrible that, when we develop services, we always want the services light, light, light. Yes, I understand the point, but then it's a bit like saying to these young people that you're lost already, that we'll focus on those who we can treat with light services, and forget about you, that you are moved to a trash can.

There appeared to be a mismatch between typical clients and available mental health services, which complicated processing people forward. The professionals encountered young people who clearly needed specialist care but could not access it. Some professionals interpreted the long waiting times for overwhelmed mental health services to mean that it did not even pay to make a referral to otherwise suitable services; they tried instead to find another way to support the client. In other words, due to the friction in the system, they ended up pausing the processing of the client.

All the professionals communicated their 'youth-friendly' approach in the sense that they were empathetic towards their clients and emphasised their autonomy in articulating their goals as well as their right to determine what elements are contained in a 'good life'. Plans on service pathways were made according to what the young person was ready and willing to do. Further, it was noted that listening to young people and respecting their views was a precondition for the development of professional-client relationships, because the young people themselves determined whether they wanted to accept the position of being supported. However, the professionals also persuaded clients to access services even when the clients doubted their usefulness. The interviewees justified setting priorities for young clients by stating that young people may not be able to articulate their needs. According to the interviewees, it may be easier for young people to complain initially about lack of money or a job, but 'when you start talking, you realise that there really are more important things to solve', such as loneliness and mental health problems.

5. Discussion

This article aimed to develop a holistic understanding of youth welfare services as described by frontline professionals. Practically, we listened to how welfare service professionals spoke about their work and their interactions with young people seeking help or being referred to services. These professionals operate as street-level bureaucrats, accountable to both their organizations and the young people they serve, and as members of a larger, multidisciplinary service system within a universalistic transition regime. We argue that, despite the service-specific institutional logics, similar functions guide the performance of youth welfare service provision and shape how young clients progress from one service to another.

The typology and its four categories presented in section 4.1

illustrate the basic functions of youth welfare services. Most professionals fulfil two or more functions in their work with young people, but the services nevertheless differ from one another in how each function is emphasised. The typology also demonstrates that young people often need more than one form of support for different aspects of their lives. Thus, rather than talking about service pathways—a metaphor that implies moving forward along a chain of services one service at a time—a better conceptualisation is a simultaneous, multidisciplinary approach that reflects the complementary nature of services.

The societal anxiety regarding the exclusion of young people has created pressure to facilitate access to services, which is reflected in the abundance of people-processing across the service system. We investigated three types of people-processing: classifying, assessing and guiding/referring to further services. The types are interlinked with one another, and classifying and assessing are usually needed to make sure that young clients are referred to the right, suitable services at the right time. In all manifestations of people-processing, we detect youth-specific features. First, various age limits defined by different institutions for different purposes present a complex system of classifying young adults along the continuum between dependent and independent. Second, assessing appears to be repetitive and overlapping due to the aim of offering multidisciplinary support to young people. While age provided a way to classify clients to different services, assessments were more ambiguous activities, causing occasional frictions among professionals. Third, people-processing, understood as controlling access to further services, may carry a connotation of strict gatekeeping and restricting access. In youth welfare services, however, control was understood more as holding on to young people, offering encouragement, paving the way to other services and controlling conditions so that services are as accessible and accommodating as possible.

Welfare services struggle with complicated issues and limited resources, so various tensions are inevitable. Some young people were reluctant to be processed; they were hiding their condition or did not feel that they needed support, despite the assessment of a professional. Persuading young people to accept the role or label of being supported could, in fact, be understood not only as people-processing but also as the first step towards people-changing. However, the need for persuasive people-processing reflects both young people's lack of initiative and, to a great extent, flaws in the system, such as long waiting times and inflexible practices.

Further, while youth welfare services provide care, guidance and support, there are aspects of control, compulsory measures and sanctions for non-compliance. The emotional labour related to frictions in people-processing was associated with frustration with inflexible structures interpreted as unfair as well as with disagreements on how to categorise and which service best met the client's needs. While the youth-specific services claim to be youth friendly, the professionals constantly balanced between respecting young people's autonomy and prioritising aims and activation ideals established by public policy. This tension between respecting clients' autonomy and directing them to certain services also shows how the three technologies of people-processing, people-sustaining and people-changing are blurred in practical work.

One could also ask whether the element of people-processing is unwarranted or excessive in the service system. While there was a consensus in the 2010s on the need to develop One-Stop Guidance Centers to concentrate on people-processing to tackle the 'NEET problem', having OSGCs can be understood as a symptom of the services' reduced flexibility and client orientation and the trend of cutting service-specific guidance in the name of efficiency, automation and digitalisation. Further, the existence of a highly specialised, versatile service system may contribute to a mentality or a guiding principle shared by different services that the best way to help a young person is to keep them moving on a service pathway and continually search for a more suitable service for them instead of working with them on a long-term basis.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, our analysis reveals that features of people-processing are prevalent across various service sectors and organizations within youth welfare services. Additionally, these services impose specific youth-related characteristics, such as age limits, repetitive and overlapping assessments, and an ambivalence between control and support. Rather than being a simple technical task of classifying, assessing, or providing referrals, people-processing in all the explored services appears to be more encompassing.

Processing young people appears to be a complicated, delicate exercise that causes frustration among professionals and frictions between services. The service system's efficiency requirements and high client volumes mean that the system is ill suited to long-term, relationship-based work, and there is an incentive to process clients forward. People-processing confers diagnoses and social statuses on young people (Hasenfeld, 1972). Although clients of the age of majority could be expected to take care of themselves independently, those with various problems are granted a social status of semi-dependency or semi-independency (see Coles, 1995) as people needing special encouragement and follow-up to proceed in the services.

Funding

The work was financially supported by Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr Riitta-Liisa Kinni and Dr Piia Puurunen for their support in familiarising with the literature on institutional technologies and the professionals who gave their time to share their views in the interviews. This work was supported by Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

References

- Aaltonen, S., Berg, P., & Ikäheimo, S. (2016). *The relationship between youth and the welfare services*. Nordic Welfare Centre.
- Antonucci, L., Hamilton, M., & Roberts, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Young people and social policy in Europe: Dealing with risk, inequality and precarity in times of crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Coles, B. (1995). *Youth and social policy: Youth citizenship and young careers*. UCL Press.
- Compulsory Education Act 1214/2020. (2020). Oppivelvollisuuslaki. <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2020/20201214>.
- Durose, C. (2011). Revisiting Lipsky: Front-line work in UK local governance. *Political Studies*, 59(4), 978–995. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00886.x>
- Gibson, K., Samuels, G., & Pryce, J. (2018). Authors of accountability: Paperwork and social work in contemporary child welfare practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 85, 43–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.12.010>
- Harris, A. (2008). The social construction of "sophisticated" adolescents: How judges integrate juvenile and criminal justice decision-making models. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37(4), 469–506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241607309886>
- Hasenfeld, Y. (1972). People-processing organizations: An exchange approach. *American Sociological Review*, 37(3), 256–263. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2093466>
- Hasenfeld, Y. (1992). *Human services as complex organizations*. Sage.
- Hasenfeld, Y., & Cheung, P. P. L. (1985). The juvenile court as a people-processing organization: A political economy perspective. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90(4), 801–824. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228145>
- Health Care Act 1326/2010. (2010) Terveystieteidenhuoltolaki. <https://finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2010/20101326#L1P1>.

- Helve, H. (2014). Youth policies in the Nordic countries. In B. Belton (Ed.), *Cadjan-Kiduhu* (pp. 151–164). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-767-4_8.
- Hästäbacka, N., Lippinen, O., Aaltonen, S., & Karvonen, S. (2023). "Ei oo tarkoitus kiinnittyä pitkäksi aikaa, vaan jatko-ohjataan": Ammattilaisten näkökulmia nuorten palveluiden nykytilaan ja kehittämistarpeisiin hyvinvointialueilla. ["Not meant to commit for a long time, but to be guided forward": Professionals' perspectives on the current state and development needs of youth services in welfare service counties.] Raportti 14/2023. Terveyden ja Hyvinvoinnin laitos (THL). <https://www.julkari.fi/handle/10024/147947>.
- Joronen, K., Kanste, O., Halme, N., Perälä, M.-L., & Pelkonen, M. (2018). *Lasten ja nuorten terveyttä, hyvinvointia, kasvua ja oppimista edistävien palvelujen integraatiota tukevat toimet eri maissa* [Measures supporting the integration of services promoting the health, welfare, growth and learning of children and young people in different countries]. Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 35/2018. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-287-540-2>.
- Kallinen, Y., & Häikiö, L. (2021). Individualisation of disadvantaged young people's agency. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(1), 110–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1710482>
- Kauppinen, E., Tormulainen, A., & Laine, S. (2024). Encountering Young People in Detached Youth Work in Finland. *Child & Youth Services*, 1–27. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uef.fi:2443/10.1080/0145935X.2024.2336902>.
- Kontrimiene, A., Blazevidiene, A., Liseckiene, I., Gediminas, R., Valius, L., & Jaruseviciene, L. (2021). Partnership between primary health and social care services in the long-term care of older people with dementia: A vignette study. *INQUIRY: A Journal of Medical Care Organization, Provision and Financing*, 58(7). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00469580211011933>, 469580211011933.
- Kinni, R.-L. (2014). *Gerontologinen sosiaalityö ja ihmisten työstäminen: Kategorisointia sairaalan moniammatillisessa työssä [Gerontological social work and people-processing. Categorization in the multiprofessional work in a hospital]*. Kuopio: Itä-Suomen yliopisto.
- Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services* (Updated ed.). Russell Sage Foundation.
- OECD. (2023). *Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) (indicator)*. doi: 10.1787/72d1033a-en.
- Oterholm, I., & Paulsen, V. (2018). Young people and social workers' experience of differences between child welfare services and social services. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 8(sup1), 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2018.1450283>
- Przeperski, J., & Taylor, B. (2022). Cooperation in child welfare decision making: Qualitative vignette study. *Child Care in Practice*, 28(2), 137–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2019.1701412>
- Reay, T., & Hinings, C. R. (2009). Managing the Rivalry of Competing Institutional Logics. *Organization Studies*, 30(6), 629–652. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609104803>
- Regional State Administrative Agency. (2023). *Outreach youth work*. <https://avi.fi/en/about-us/our-services/education-and-culture/youth-work/outreach-youth-work>.
- Shiff, T. (2021). A sociology of discordance: Negotiating schemas of deservingness and codified law in U.S. asylum status determinations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 127(2), 337–375. <https://doi.org/10.1086/716485>
- Social Welfare Act, 1301/2014. (2014). Sosiaalihuoltolaki. <https://finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2014/20141301>.
- Stranz, H., Wiklund, S., & Karlsson, P. (2016). People-processing in Swedish personal social services. On the individuals, their predicaments and the outcomes of organisational screening. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 6(3), 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2015.1134630>
- Thornton, P. H., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2012). *The institutional logics perspective: A new approach to culture, structure and process*. OUP Oxford.
- Timperi, T. (2022). *Sote-integraation edellyttämä monialainen yhteistyöosaaminen [Multidisciplinary collaborative competence required for the integration of health and social services]*. Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö: Selvityshenkilön raportti. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-00-5399-4>.
- Turba, H., Breimo, J. P., & Lo, C. (2019). Professional and organizational power intertwined: Barriers to networking? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 107, Article 104527. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2019.104527>
- Van der Leun, J. (2006). Excluding illegal migrants in the Netherlands: Between national policies and local implementations. *West European Politics*, 29(2), 310–326.
- Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of youth transitions. Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *Young*, 14(2), 119–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308806062737>
- Youdell, D., & McGimpsey, I. (2015). Assembling, disassembling and reassembling "youth services" in austerity Britain. *Critical Studies in Education*, 56(1), 116–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2015.975734>
- Youth Act, 1285/2016. (2016). Nuorisolaki. <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/2016/20161285>.