**Justifying the Authentic Self.
Swedish Public Service Workers Talking About Work Stress**

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Abstract: This study is based on in-depth interviews with 28 Swedish public service workers. With the help of narrative analysis, we explore how the workers use language to explain their subjective experiences of work stress. Based on a three-level typology, this article examines: 1. the narrative elements in the workers' talk about their stress; 2. the narrative strategies they use in positioning or presenting themselves as "stressed"; and 3. the function of the narratives in a societal context. The study shows the following main results: 1. the workers express feelings of shame when talking about their experiences of work stress; 2. they use justifying accounts, e.g. accepting responsibility for becoming ill; and 3. it is suggested that the public service workers' justifications reflect societal demands of being authentic and true to personal values, and that the dominating expressed value is about a public service ethos.

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1. Introduction

Stress, particularly work-related stress, has aroused growing interest across Europe in recent years. Workers are reporting an increasing level of mental health problems. Symptoms of fatigue related to stress and the development of mentally exhausting work are growing problems in Europe. In a survey carried out by the EUROPEAN AGENCY FOR SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK (2011) in all European Union member states, stress was experienced by an average of 22% of the working Europeans. Sweden is one of the European countries where stress-related problems are most prevalent. Today, stress and mental strain are the leading causes of work-related disorders among women, and the second most common reasons among men (SWEDISH WORK ENVIRONMENT AUTHORITY, 2014). Particularly, work-related stress and stress-related illness have been noted to be common among public employees in general (STATISTICS SWEDEN, 2012). [1]

In addition to research about objective work stressors—at individual, organisational, and societal levels—a new approach to work stress has emerged during more recent years and several scholars argue for examinations of subjective rather than objective work stressors, based on evidence that the meanings which individuals attribute to events determine their stress experience (DICK, 2000; GUSTAFSSON, NORBERG & STRANDBERG, 2008; HEPBURN & BROWN, 2001; KELLY & COLQUHOUN, 2003; LEWIG & DOLLARD, 2001; NEWTON, 1995, 1999; PAYNE & COOPER, 2001; PERREWÉ & ZELLARS, 1999; SEVERINSSON, 2003). According to SCOTT (1990, pp.135f.), "the stress discourse is a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs that are embedded in institutions, social relationships, and texts" (see also EHRENBERG, 2010; FRIBERG, 2006). MEYERSON (1994, p.628) argues that researchers should account for the ways in which concrete meanings of stress vary across, reflect, and reinforce dominant ideologies of the institutions in which people work. For example, in nursing and health sciences, narrative analysis has been used to examine nurses' experiences of stress and shortcomings in relation to their value system, e.g. how to care for patients and how to handle work in relation to patients' autonomy (SEVERINSSON, 2003). Furthermore, HARKNESS et al. (2005) explored the way in which clerical workers in a Canadian city explained their experiences of work stress, and found that the participants used two main interpretative repertoires to describe their experience of being stressed at work: 1. talking about being stressed provides a socially acceptable way of expressing discomfort and regaining a sense of importance that is lost through feeling under-valued and underappreciated in the organisation; and 2. the clerical workers who admitted being unable to cope with stress were considered to be "abnormal" (KINMAN & JONES, 2005; MEYERSON, 1998; WAINWRIGHT & CALNAN, 2002)—a finding that is consistent with the theory that emotions are a socially conditioned response, governed by unwritten rules about when and where it is appropriate to express certain emotions (HARKNESS et al., 2005, p.128). [2]

In this article, we explore how 28 (19 female and 9 men) Swedish public service employees use language to explain their subjective experiences of work stress. We begin by presenting the empirical study—the sample, interview method, and interpretation process. Thereafter, the article is structured in three parts (Findings 1, 2, 3), which correspond with the adopted narrative analytic approach. In the first of the three findings we explore narrative elements (actors, settings, and events) in the workers' linguistic construction of work stress. In the second, we identify narrative strategies they use in positioning or presenting themselves as "stressed"; and in the third section, we discuss the function of the narratives in a structural context. The article ends with a discussion about the main results in relation to the concept of public service values as well as to the contemporary culture of authenticity. [3]

2. About the Study

The empirical material derives from a larger comparative study about stress in Swedish public and private organisations which was conducted with the help of a multi-sited ethnographic method. Qualitative data were collected with the help of interviews with employees, representatives for management and local safety deputies, as well as observations at work sites, access to policy documents, work environment evaluations and other documents at six work settings (for more information about the larger study, please see THUNMAN, 2013). In the present article, with the aim to explore narratives about stress within public service organisations, we specifically focus on the empirical material consisting of interviews made in the four participating public workplaces: a compulsory school, an upper secondary school, an employment office and an elderly care centre. The particular sample is based on the occupational groups with statistically high work stress and stress-related mental illness (SWEDISH WORK ENVIRONMENT AUTHORITY, 2014). The selection of work sites was directed by the condition that the professional groups mentioned above would be well represented. [4]

The local management or safety deputy sending out a request to the employees before the visit made the selection of informants. We arranged additional interviews after the arrival at the work sites. Between six and eight interviews were conducted in each work place. Each interview lasted one to two hours. The study proposal was reviewed and approved to be in line with the University of Uppsala research ethics guidelines. Interviewees were re-invited to participate on the basis of informed consent (and were informed of their right to withdraw during the interview process). [5]

Common work stress disorders reported by the interviewed workers were described as moderate or severe anxiousness, nervousness or anxiety, sleeping problems, constant fatigue and/or severe pain in the shoulder blades, neck or shoulders (DANIELSSON et al., 2012). Two participants were not diagnosed with any stress-related disorders, but are nevertheless included in the study since they showed signs of common stress problems and they also revealed, during the interview, clear experiences of work stress. [6]

The interviews were performed according to a semi-structured design (MERTON, FISKE & KENDALL, 1990 [1956], p.16), which means that the interview questions were based on, but not delimited to, a few themes, such as relationship to work; values about what is important when working and the opportunities to practice values at work; complicity and influence in relation to the organisation's or company's policy, objectives, and directives; workplace changes and their implications for the working conditions; and experiences of stress and mental troubles. Although the project and interview guide had a clear focus on work situation and work-related stress, it was important to let the interviewees feel that they were free to talk about these issues in their own words, based on their individual experiences. In other words, we used a semi-structured interview design in order to capture how the participants think, talk, and create meaning out of their experiences about work stress. [7]

The interviews were performed at the work place of the interview participants out of respect for the participants' time, but also with the intention to observe and get acquainted with the place where the participants spend most of their work day (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1983, pp.118ff.). The interviews were interpreted with the work context in which they were produced in mind, and they usually began with a series of neutral opening questions about personal background, interest, etc., in order to get the conversation started and providing an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication between participant and the interviewer (MERTON et al., 1990 [1956], pp.176ff.). After the initial phase of the interview, we introduced questions of more serious and possibly sensitive character, such as questions about work situation, health and illness, feelings of (mis-)recognition, and about relationships to other family members, colleagues, managers, and clients. [8]

We started the interpretation process by listening to the recorded interviews and transcribing them. Thereafter, we read the transcriptions several times within an extended time frame and took note of illustrative quotes, as well as deleted all words that detract from the key idea of each sentence or group of sentences uttered by the respondent, in order to discern the essential features of the text. Thereafter, we began to analyse the narratives according to MISHLER's (1997, p.67) typology of narrative analysis. This particular method was chosen due to our aim to explore the public service workers' stories of work stress in regard to narrative content and strategies as well as to structural context. Put differently, we wanted to understand what the workers said, how they said it, and why they said it in the way they did. The analytical process was performed in three steps. The first step was to identify recurrent narrative elements in the stories in order to create a narrative framework, i.e. an ideal narrative that encompasses the essential meaning-units in the narratives of the whole sample of interviews. The next step was to identify the narrative strategies used by the participants to present one self and one's story, i.e. how did they talk about work stress? What linguistic techniques did they adopt? In the third and final step of analysis, we focused on the function of the narratives, i.e. why did the participants talk about work stress in the way they did? This final step of analysis involves a structural interpretation of the narratives in order to understand what the narratives can reveal about living in contemporary society and working in public service organisations. [9]

Out of the total number of 28 interviewees, three persons from three separate work sites have been selected as illustrative samples to represent the voices of the other study participants. One representative has been chosen from each public service sector: education, health care, and public employment service. Moreover, the three participants were chosen to reflect the age and gender groups of the total sample. Despite individual variety, the narratives involve shared elements, strategies, and functions, which will be shown in the empirical sections. The three persons (who were given fictitious names) we follow throughout the article are: [10]

Anders, who is in his 50s, and has worked for more than ten years at a public employment office, developed symptoms of work-related stress disorders (anxiety and sleeplessness) when he worked with long-term unemployed people who no longer have a right to public insurance. Today, Anders is re-located and works as a job coach, which he describes as a "retreat". [11]

Belinda, who is in her 30s, has worked as a teacher (grades 1-3) for two years. It was at her former work place (another school) that she got sick due to stress. Belinda describes how she is now aware of the need for personal strategies in order to not develop symptoms (constant fatigue and depression) of work stress again. However, she considers a change of career because she thinks the heavy work load takes all the fun out of the job. [12]

Claudia, who is in her 50s, has worked ten years as a health care assistant at a short term accommodation for elderly people. She is not diagnosed with any stress-related disorders. However, due to symptoms of anxiety and nervousness connected to the stress experience, she has found it necessary to slow down the pace at work. She plans to educate herself and become a nurse in order to get more power over her work and, she says, hopefully a less stressful work day. [13]

3. Findings

Building upon MISHLERS (1997, p.67) typology of narrative analysis, we structured our analysis according to three aspects: 1. narrative framework, 2. narrative strategies, and 3. narrative functions. With narrative framework, we refer to the recurrent narrative elements in the stories (actors, settings, and events). Narrative strategies are linguistic techniques used to construct narratives, e.g. accounts (SCOTT & LYMAN, 1968). Finally, we discuss narrative functions within the societal and cultural systems of meaning in which the interview participants live and work. [14]

3.1 Narrative elements: Expressions of shame

Although a story can be told in various temporal ways, there are always certain necessary buildings blocks, or narrative elements, that together construct every story (MISHLER, 1997). According to LABOV (1972), a complete oral narrative is composed of an abstract, or what the story is about; an orientation, or the who, when, where and what of the story; some complicating action, or the then-what-happened?; an evaluation, or the so-what?; a resolution, or the what-finally-happened?; and a coda, or a signal that indicates that the story is finished. In this study, we use a less formal approach to the analysis of narratives and identify four central narrative elements: *Actor* (self, colleagues, clients, and managers), *setting* (Work and home domain), *temporality* (before illness, turning point, after illness), and *evaluation* (emotions of shame and pride). [15]

The self-proclaimed main *actor* in all the stories is of course the self, i.e. the narrator. It is the self that tells a story about him-/herself in relation to other individuals, such as colleagues, clients, and managers. Colleagues are portrayed

in both supportive and obstructive ways: Belinda describes how she got support and help from her teacher colleagues at times when she felt she was losing control over her work. Anders describes how his colleagues at the public employment office helped him realise how bad of a shape he was in due to too much work. On the other hand, Claudia complains about her colleagues at the elderly care centre who, according to her, are too lazy, which in turn creates more work and stress for her.

> "They [the colleagues] have the same salary as I though I work for four people. At performance reviews the manager told me that she could not give me a higher salary because I work extra since it's my own choice to do so".[1] [16]

Clients (pupils, unemployed, patients) are mainly portrayed as actors towards which the self owes certain duties and responsibilities. Though the clients can be demanding, they are always depicted in positive ways—it is simply the clients' right to be helped and supported by the public service workers.

> "The pupils are also talented to a varying degree and then one feels that one is not really enough. How will I be enough for this whole group? Everyone should be taught [that] ... education should reflect their degree, and there I still feel that I do not know how to do it so everyone gets the education that suits their skill level" (Belinda). [17]

Managers, however, are without exception depicted in all of the narratives as "absent", "invisible", or "disordered". None of the interviewees says that they feel any recognition or support from their managers. [18]

The dominant *setting* in the narratives is, not surprisingly, the work place, since we deliberately chose to perform each interview at the participants' work places (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1983, p.126). In some instances, the home is included in the stories as examples of how work stress can spread (spill over), between the work and home domain and taint the private life of the interviewees (KAMP, LAMBRECHT LUND & SØNDERGAARD, 2010; NIPPERT-ENG, 1996).

> "But I've decided now that I should not work so much overtime. But now I have written reviews that are to be ready on Wednesday, and I have not had time to do them, so there will be overtime. And then it's time for performance reviews and then there will be overtime. And tonight, we have craft night, so then it becomes overtime. So you work more than what is said, you do" (Belinda). [19]

In a previous study about experiences of burnout (THUNMAN, 2011) three *temporal* elements were identified: before illness, turning point, and after illness (see also FRANK, 1993, and ERIKSSON, STARRIN & JANSSON, 2003, regarding temporalities of "illness narratives"). In this study, most narratives involve all three temporal elements; often leading up to the turning point that forced the workers to start to reflect and alter their way of life. The turning point for Anders came when his colleagues confronted him:

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1   The quotes used in this article we translated from Swedish into English.

> "I didn't notice myself that I was getting sick, it was my colleagues who came to me and said: 'Damn, look at yourself! How much do you actually drink? You should do something about this'. And I was actually sober." [20]

The element of *evaluation* involves the emotional side of the narratives, and provides information about how the narrator felt about events he/she experienced. Shame has been observed in several studies about work stress and stress related disorders (e.g. burnout), and is often treated as an emotional response and personal experience of failure for not being able to meet increasing or conflicting demands of work life (ERIKSSON et al., 2003; HOCHSCHILD, 1983; SCHEFF, 1990). Contrary to feelings of shame are feelings of pride, which are often associated with accomplishments and successful undertakings at work. However, in line with findings in other work stress research, narrative expressions of feelings of pride are quite rare in this study. Instead, the dominant feeling that is expressed in the narratives of the public service workers is shame, which we understand as a collective concept that includes feelings of meaninglessness, alienation, sadness, frustration, or worthlessness (ERIKSSON et al., 2003, p.75); or as Anders puts it:

> "What I personally believe was most draining was the feeling that there was so much I could have done, but I always felt I did not have the time. It made me feel unsatisfied, because I ... well, there were a lot of opportunities to do things if the strength and the time had been enough. And then I felt that I got stuck in administering very much. There was a lot of administrative work and to arrange money and very little employment service. If I can take two hours and make eight calls, I can actually find an internship in which this person can get a chance to see what she is capable of and sort of get her confidence back ... but I didn't find those hours. And they never came. I mean, it was quite a lot of cases I had where I didn't contribute to something good". [21]

To better understand why the interviewees express shame for being stressed and ill, we will take a closer look at the strategies the participants are using to position and present themselves as "stressed". [22]

3.2 Narrative strategies: Justifications

In this section, we focus on the participants' strategies of storytelling with the help of "accounts". Originating from AUSTIN's (1956-57) basic distinction between justification and excuses, the notion of accounts was introduced in narrative analysis by SCOTT and LYMAN (1968, p.46): According to them, an account is a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry. Such devices are crucial elements in the social order since they prevent conflicts from arising by verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation. Moreover, accounts are situated according to the statuses of the interactants, and are standardised within cultures so that certain accounts are terminologically stabilised and routinely expected when activity falls outside the domain of expectations. The notion of accounts has been used to study narratives on different topics, such as bribes (WÄSTERFORS, 2004), business bankruptcy

(SELLERBERG, 2009), as well as within health care (GUNNARSSON,
HEMMINGSSON & HYDÉN, 2013) and courts (ATKINSON & DREW, 1979).
Accounts come in two forms: excuses and justifications. Either or both are likely
to be invoked when a person is accused of having done something that is bad,
wrong, inept, unwelcome, or, in some other of numerous possible ways,
untoward. [23]

Excuses are socially approved vocabularies for mitigating or relieving
responsibility when conduct is questioned (SYKES & MATZA, 1957). SCOTT and
LYMAN (1968, pp.47ff.) distinguish between four modal forms by which excuses
are typically formulated: appeal to accidents, appeal to defeasibility, appeal to
biological drives, and "scapegoating". Like excuses, *justifications* are socially
approved vocabularies that neutralise an act or its consequences when one or
both are called into question. But here is the crucial difference: to justify an act is
to assert its positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary (p.51). [24]

Categorising the narratives according to these two notions—excuses and
justifications—we found that none of the interviewees appealed to the account
excuses. They do not try to play the victim of organisational conspiracies or evil
managers. Instead, the interviewees accept responsibility for their present
situation, even when the work load is too heavy, or managerial responsibility is
lacking. Sometimes, this can mean that the workers need to cheat or work
around the organisational rules:

> "Yes, it is expected that you take the initiative. Yes, fix it. And if you can't do it other
> than by cheating, then you cheat, and the results, quantitatively, will be good and then
> everyone is happy (...) But the responsibility is mine for the decisions I have made,
> and it is in the system that you have to cheat a bit and as long as it is not detected it
> does not matter" (Anders). [25]

Despite that Anders sometimes is forced to "cut corners" and create individual
workarounds due to the high work load, he does not blame anyone else for his
stress-related disorders. He, like the rest of the interview participants, takes full
responsibility for not managing to bring together all the missions and the
expressed as well as unspoken, demands he puts on himself. Claudia does the
same thing:

> "This morning I talked to the nurse [her supervisor] and she said: 'You have to take it
> easy'. But how am I supposed to take it easy? When I see that it does not work ... I've
> been away for a bit now [and] when I come back it's completely different. And even
> the residents say: 'Now there will be order again'. They notice who is taking more
> responsibility. They also need to know who they can turn to. Not the one who says:
> 'No, no I do not have time'. (...) They always turn to me: 'How should we do it? Can
> you help?' But I want it to work well, and that the residents feel safe when I am here.
> No one has told me that I should take more responsibility, but I do it myself. It's me,
> it's my fault". [26]

The stories are all by nature justifications—explanatory statements of a sequence of events in which the workers perceive themselves in an impossible situation. SCOTT and LYMAN (1968, p.46) emphasise how an account works to repair damage or imbalance that might otherwise arise in the interaction. The account restores harmony in the interaction and preserves the image of the person in others' eyes. This is done by placing the responsibility on the self, but simultaneously seeking absolution by the counterparty. SCOTT and LYMAN (p.51) exemplify four types of justifications: "denial of injury", "denial of victim", "condemnation of condemners", and "appeal to loyalties". The latter category, appeal to loyalties, is the most common type used by the participants in this study. Here, the actor asserts that his/her action was permissible or even right since it served the interests of another to whom he or she owes an unbreakable allegiance or affection. The most obvious form of appealing to loyalty is by directing it towards concrete others such as clients, pupils, or patients.

"If the residents are happy, I am happy. I do not work because the staff or the boss is satisfied. I take care of my residents who live here. And you hear all the time that they are very satisfied and happy. It feels good for me. And I am always there when needed" (Claudia). [27]

For Claudia, her loyalty is directed at her patients, the elderly people living in the elderly care where she works. Similarly, Belinda talks about loyalty to her pupils and of how much that personal costs her in terms of health and well-being.

"I think my responsibility is that these students will learn and achieve certain goals. (...) When I started working, I thought so big and immense. These students should be able to get a job when they are eighteen ... and then it became too much. I took responsibility for their lives, it became too much for me. If I have responsibility for 20 children and their lives, and what if they fail ... it became too much for me". [28]

There is, however, a difference between the accounts in this study and those of SCOTT and LYMAN (1968). As an example of a justification, SCOTT and LYMAN (p. 47) refer to a soldier in combat who may admit that he has killed other men, but denies that he did an immoral act since those he killed were members of an enemy group and hence "deserved" their fate. The combat soldier could admit the wrongfulness of killing but claim that his acts are not entirely undertaken by volition: he is "under orders" and must obey. Interestingly, all of the participants admit wrong doing and take full responsibility for being stressed and ill, but not based on any outer, objective, criteria (e.g., being under orders from someone else), but rather based on inner, subjective criteria. Put differently, their perceived "orders" are not defined by their managers, pupils, patients, or clients, but by themselves. Interpreting the inner "orders" and demands as individual expressions of internalised norms and ideals promoted in contemporary society, particularly within the public service sector, we will now take a closer look at the ideals and values the participants are loyal to. [29]

3.3 Narrative function: Authenticity

People draw upon language and common symbols to create understandings and meanings as well as to enact their lives through stories. Narratives have been suggested not only to be great tools in understanding different practices, but also to be able to become who we are, to create meaningful stories about how we are, and to re-produce societal discourses and systems of meanings (POTTER & WETHERELL, 1987). Or as RIESSMAN (2005, p.6) writes: "narrative analysis can forge connections between personal biography and social structure—the personal and the political". By studying narratives in contexts, it is possible to uncover implicit systems of values (ADELSWÄRD, 1997, p.214). In this third analytical section, we focus on the functions that the narratives fulfil in a societal and cultural context (MISHLER, 1997, p.63) by examining how the interviewed public service workers present and justify themselves in relation to certain values. [30]

There is a tendency among the interviewees to follow similar patterns of presenting themselves. It is important to point out that the participants not only love their jobs, and love working with other people, but that they also value hard and autonomous work. But above all else, the participants emphasise their idealistic and genuine engagement in their work:

> "I enjoy my job. I want to do the best. They [the colleagues] think I am stupid—I notice it—for working so much: 'you might as well live here', they say. (...) If you think that only money and time is important, you should not be in this job. Everyone thinks differently. Some just want to finish the job or what is written on the card and then 'bye!' We are different" (Claudia).

> "Of course there are more things in life than work that are important, but it is my opinion that work is central. (...) I think you can become stressed by too much commitment, but I also believe that one can become stressed by not feeling needed, that what you do has significance" (Anders). [31]

This engaged and self-enterprising attitude towards their work, observed in the narratives, can be interpreted as signs of personal motivations to present their "true" or "authentic" selves, i.e. the self-perceived and "felt" identity (ERICKSON, 1995, pp.125ff.). During the last decades, the concept of authenticity has been used to study narratives on different topics, such as in studies of consumer cultures (VANNINI & WILLIAMS, 2009) and in studies of professional ethics, interactional work, and emotional labour (HOCHSCHILD, 1983; MALM, 2008). Within identity theory, the notion of authenticity is understood as commitment to "self-values", that is, values applied to oneself, as a vital part of feeling authentic, or true to one self (ERICKSON, 1995; ERICKSON & WHARTON, 1997). By conceptualising authenticity in terms of a system of self-values, the self is put forth as changeable and dynamic. An understanding is enabled, not only of how emotions are fundamental to experience authenticity, but also of how such feelings shape and motivate behaviour at the same time as they are influenced by the surrounding social and interactional settings. "Feelings of inauthenticity, which may follow the violation of a commitment to self", are seen "as a result of

violating one's level of commitment to a particular self-value" (p.131). Authenticity can, in this regard, be defined as being in the state of acting in accordance with one's own underlying, but culturally bound, moral values. Or, as VANNINI and WILLIAMS (2009, p.3) write:

> "Authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and space have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar". [32]

So what kind of ideal qualities or values are expressed in the public service workers' narratives? [33]

A critical factor in the delivery of public services has been an allegiance of professionals to the so called ethos of public service (HORTON, 2008). Values intrinsic to that are said to include commitment, accountability, integrity, impartiality, organisational citizenship behaviour, and some notion of the public interest, distinct from private interests (FOSTER & WILDING, 2000; LAWTON, 1998; NEEDHAM, 2006). In various ways, all the participating interviewees draw upon commonly recognised public service values, such as Anders when talking about how he perceives his own contribution to a healthy labour market:

> "I think I am contributing to a labour market in better balance if I'm out meeting employers and tell them that here we have the potential to reduce the stress on those you work with and with fairly good economic conditions so you can get a person in who can ease the burdens here and it's for the good of the city budget, the employer's profit, and for the employer personnel for becoming less busy, and [for] my disabled jobseekers". [34]

Furthermore, the ethos encapsulates the principles of loyalty, responsibility, honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, incorruptibility, justice, and democracy (HORTON & FARNHAM, 1999; MALM, 2008). Survey and case study evidence from other research suggests that those working in the public sector have a more altruistic motivation, and greater attachment to "social values", than those in the private sector (BUELENS & VAN DEN BROECK, 2007; HEBSON, GRIMSHAW & MARCHINGTON, 2003; HOUSTON, 2006). Such altruistic ideals are illustrated by Belinda's words when talking about humanistic ideals and responsibility towards her pupils:

> "So I begin each day by greeting the kids and look them in the eye and try to confirm them and that you can feel that I do some good. That's why I have chosen to work as a teacher. To feel that you can influence and add values and ideas that are important. And it provides meaning to my own work". [35]

The public service ethos can be regarded as an attachment to the intrinsic elements of a job, which include feelings of accomplishment and self-worth, as Claudia puts it: "My work is important, for me and for the elderly whom I help". This dedication to public service values can be regarded as something prominent, something that gives meaning to the work, and generates feelings of authenticity

to the life of the workers. The same dedication can, however, also give rise to feelings of in-authenticity if the workers perceive that they are not able to fulfil their values in encounters at work such as Claudia describes it:

> "Sometimes I feel really bad, like today, because we have a client who will not get up. She just wants to sleep, but I go to her several times and try to give her something to eat, to drink, and to talk to her so that she'll hear a little voice, and feel my touch, and know that I'm there. If I'm not doing this I'm not feeling good". [36]

Similarly, most of the interviewed workers describe restraining emotions or passions in various ways, e.g. feelings of being a "bad" or an "unworthy person" when they are unable to perform their work according to their convictions. Having said this, we understand the function of the narratives as individual explanations to construct and convey an authentic and personal public service identity as well as to convey workers' feelings of inauthenticity for not being able to fulfil their true selves through their work. [37]

4. Discussion

In this article, we have explored how Swedish public service workers use language to explain their subjective experiences of work stress. Using a narrative analytic approach, the article has examined: 1. the narrative elements in the workers' linguistic construction of work stress; 2. the narrative strategies they use in positioning or presenting themselves as "stressed"; and 3. the function of the narratives in a societal context. In answer to these questions, we have shown that: 1. the main feeling expressed in the workers' stories is shame; 2. the public service workers account for their experiences of work stress by accepting responsibility for becoming ill; and 3. it is suggested that the public service workers' justifications reflect societal demands of being authentic and true to personal values, and that the dominating expressed value is about a public service ethos. [38]

As pointed out by several stress discourse researchers (HARKNESS et al., 2005; KINMAN & JONES, 2005; MEYERSON, 1998; WAINWRIGHT & CALNAN, 2002), talking about being stressed can provide a socially acceptable way of expressing discomfort and regaining a sense of importance that is lost through feeling under-valued and underappreciated in the organisation. Our findings indicate that talking about self-values can provide the same function as talking about stress, i.e. talking about being authentic to public service values provides the public service workers with a socially acceptable way of expressing organisational criticism and regaining a sense of personal and professional value. [39]

HARKNESS et al. (2005) also point out that admitting to being unable to cope with stress can be considered to be "abnormal", according to the prevailing stress discourse. In our study, when the public workers talk about how they developed symptoms of stress and no longer could maintain "normality", they report they felt shame. Interpreted in line with stress discourse research, the narratives of the interviewed workers illustrate how the stress discourse can be used in identity

work and self-management through the justifying accounts for their perceived "failure" for not being able to individually cope with work stress. [40]

However, our results also indicate that admitting to being unable to cope with stress can not only be considered to be "abnormal" and shameful but also "inauthentic". The results suggest that the interviewees justify their shortcomings at work by claiming that their efforts to fulfil personal values (public service values) were difficult to realise. As we have shown above, they portray themselves as people with great personal interest in, even connecting their identity to, the realisation of public service values. Not being able to do this is connected to a sense of lost truthfulness to the values they associate their identity with. [41]

Relating the public service workers' expressed thoughts and feelings about themselves to a more all-embracing social transformation perspective, leading social scientists have suggested that in today's "authenticity culture" (TAYLOR, 1991), "more and more the presentation of an 'authentic self' is one of the demands placed upon individuals, above all in the sphere of skilled labor" (HONNETH, 2004, p.467). In the interviewed workers' narratives we see signs (e.g. the willingness to accept responsibility and the feelings of shame connected to its failure) of a new demand of not simply being loyal and devoted to public service values, but of transforming those public service values into one's own, as part of one's authentic self. Maybe it is possible to say that, in the authenticity culture, the motives behind a public service ethos are partly transformed: the ethos is not just traditionally expressed as a professional value but also as a personal value. One question for further studies is if employees in other sectors defend their stress experiences in a similar way. If that is the case, which personal values do they link their authentic self to? [42]

Acknowledgements

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