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Social Work Interactions between Service Users and Social Workers

A Case Study of The Welfare Home Svenstrupgård

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<p>Abstract</p>	<p>This qualitative study examines social work interactions between homeless service users and social workers with the aim of identifying main topics discussed during interactions, how service users and social workers present themselves to each other and how consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved.</p> <p>Empirical evidence was obtained by observing interactions between social workers and service users and by conducting semi structured interviews with them at Svenstrupgård. Thematic analysis method was used to identify three main themes from the data, namely, topics of social work interactions, interpersonal dynamics of social work interactions and collaborative social work interactions. These themes were explored and reflected upon within the theoretical framework of social constructivism and Foucault’s theory of power.</p> <p>Findings of this study present housing, house rules, money, work, and substance use/abuse as topics that invariably occur during social work interactions with homeless service users. This study identifies effective and motivational communication as important aspects of interpersonal dynamics in social work interactions and highlights some effective and motivational communication strategies and techniques used by social workers at Svenstrupgård. The findings also identify possibilities and challenges of collaborative social work interactions and uncovers some working methods used to motivate service users towards collaborative problem solving.</p> <p>All in all, this study gives a dynamic insight into social work interactions with homeless service users in the Danish context which is empirically useful for social work practice and social work discourses at the micro level.</p>
<p>Keywords</p>	<p>Interactions, social workers, service users, social work interactions, homelessness, Svenstrupgård.</p>

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims at exploring social work interactions between homeless service users and social workers in the Danish context using the welfare home Svenstrupgård as a case study. One of the main goals of the social work profession, according to the National Association of Social Workers (2023), is to enhance human well-being and help meet basic human needs, particularly the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. For example, homeless people in this study. The ethical principles of social work which are based on the core values of service, social justice, dignity, importance of human relations, integrity and competence are all rooted in social and interpersonal interactions and how these interactions should help people in need address social problems and challenge social injustice. The way social workers interact with service users can help attain these objectives of social work, strengthen the core values of social work, foster collaboration and positive outcomes in working processes.

According to the International Federation of social workers (2014), social work is a practice-based profession. Payne (2006) explains that when social workers talk about “practice” they are referring to what they do in interpersonal interactions with other people e.g., service users. Defining social work as a practice affirms the value of interpersonal interaction as a vital component in the whole package of social work. Social work interactions involve human interaction within the social worker-service user relationship as basis for social workers actions. All events involved in social work activity are merged and progress from one point to another based on the interaction among the individuals or groups involved. In this process, the social worker considers the complexity of the connections between different aspects of the situation they are dealing with. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics offer values, principles, and standards to guide social workers during these interactions. Social workers have professional ethics and values to help guide practice. Their cultural values and personal lived experiences have also shaped them as individuals and impacts how they interact in practice (Payne, 2006).

Turner (1988), defines social interaction *“as a situation where the behaviors of one actor are consciously reorganized by, and influence the behaviors of, another actor and vice versa.”* Turner explains that the word “behavior” in the definition is used broadly to include physical and mental processes of individuals which are influenced by interacting with others (Turner, 1988, p. 14). The

American Psychological Association (2023), defines social interaction as “*any process that involves reciprocal stimulation or response between two or more individuals...Social interaction includes the development of cooperation and competition, the influence of status and social roles, and the dynamics of group behavior, leadership, and conformity... It is only through close observation of social interaction that social organisation and social structure can be inferred.*”

Based on the above definitions, social interaction involves verbal and nonverbal communication between two or more people. How we interact has either a psychological or physical effect on those we interact with. Therefore, the people we interact with can either benefit or harmed by the way we interact with them. Social interactions can either be cooperative, competitive, conflicting, or compromising. The actors involved in any form of interactions take on different social roles which greatly determines the dynamics of the interaction.

Chapter 1 introduces this study and constructs the foundation and background knowledge for the phenomenon under study. Chapter 2 focuses on the research design and method. Chapter 3 presents epistemological and theoretical framework of the study. Chapter 4 presents research results and analysis. Chapter 5 presents discussions and concludes the study.

1.1 Social work in Denmark

Before the 19th century, social work in Denmark was carried out mainly by the church through philanthropy and public poor relief. The poor law adopted by Denmark towards the 18th century brought structure to efforts towards providing welfare to the poor. The overseers of the poor (social workers) distributed provisions to the poor and help prevent poverty by finding ways to keep members of poor households in work so that they will be able to provide for their families. Overseers were unpaid at the time because it was considered a duty for God (the church) and civic duty to the king (the state). With the increase of people in need of social services, it quickly became difficult to get enough volunteers to provide services to poor households or individuals. This motivated the provision of services to specific groups in need in institutions e.g., institutions for orphans, disabled, homeless etc. This was mainly an initiative motivated by the church (Jonasen, 2004).

Social work developed from philanthropy and public poor relief to organizations and public social work during the second half of the 19th century with the development of the welfare state which brought about the transfer of responsibility for poor relief from the church to the state. It further developed after the Second World War (1945) and really gained popularity during the 1980s (golden era). The social and economic reconstruction after the war, increased social problems brought about by the war, industrialization and urbanization highlighted the need for the state to play a more active role in the provision of Welfare. The labor movement played a vital role in highlighting the importance for citizens to have social rights alongside already existing political rights at the time. Thereby, prompting a shift from warfare to welfare (Kuhnle & Sander 2010).

During this time 1950s and 1960s, social work in Denmark was developing in the public sector. The ministry of social affairs assumed an active role in providing funding for social work-related education and employing qualified social workers at all levels (micro-macro levels). The development of social work profession in Denmark has a direct correlation with welfare policies adopted by the state and municipalities in the provision of welfare services. Due to welfare policies adopted, there was a need for competent and skilled social work professionals to develop, monitor and deliver welfare services directly to service users with the aim of improving their well-being.

Social work in Denmark was also influenced by American social work whereby, aspects such as case work, active listening, development psychology, crisis theory and communication techniques were incorporated into social work education. Social work in Denmark has continued to develop and evolve throughout the years. Adopting new working methods, processes, and policies in addressing social problems. Nowadays social work in Denmark has transitioned from “welfare” to “workfare”. This is also evident at Svenstrupgård with the use of activation programs at the workshop as will be discussed subsequently in this study (Jonasen, 2004).

“Important for social work is the prevalent high unemployment combined with the politicians' stronger emphasis on "workfare": legislation has been remodeled so as to make the social worker convince the client, that he or she will see the job just-around-the-corner, if he or she mobilises her resources (socialisation). The Minister of Employment has launched a campaign: Everybody can get into job...” (Jonasen, 2004, p. 14)

Irrespective of the political agenda of social work at any given period over the years, the main aim of social work has always remained the same. Whether philanthropic, public, or private, social

work throughout the years has always aimed at improving the well-being of individuals and groups of people in the community, who encounter a variety of social problems and whose social conditions can be improved through social work. This objective of social work can only be achieved through interpersonal interactions with individuals or groups in need.

1.2 Homelessness in Denmark

Homelessness in Denmark is regulated and institutionalized by the state and local governments. The parliament votes and creates welfare policies addressing social problems like unemployment and homelessness. Municipalities are responsible for developing strategies and funding for the provision of services meant to address these issues. Temporal accommodation is provided by municipalities at institutions formally referred to as poor houses called section 110 accommodations to homeless people without a permanent place to live if no other options are available. Svenstrupgård is an example of institutional accommodation for homeless citizens provided by Aalborg municipality (Jørgen, 2008).

The ambiguous nature of homelessness makes it challenging to have a unifying definition for the phenomenon. Benjaminsen and Christensen (2007) stress the importance of defining homelessness in a way that incorporates quantitative empirical studies and as a complex phenomenon of interacting factors at different levels which goes beyond the lack of a roof over one's head. They argue that homelessness should be viewed as an outcome of interacting social processes at different levels with a variety of structural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual risk factors that can cause anyone to be considered homeless. With these aspects in mind, a homeless person is defined in the Danish context as one who *“do not have their own (owned or rented) dwelling or room, but have to stay in temporary accommodation or stay temporarily and without a contract [tenancy] with family or friends. People who report they do not have a place to stay the next night are also counted as homeless”* (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014, p.16).

According to Benjaminsen (2018), there is continuous existence and persistence of homelessness in Denmark. The homeless strategy program launched by the Danish government in 2009, adopted the housing first approach as the principal approach in addressing homelessness. This brought about a breakthrough in policies, knowledge acquisition and understanding about interventions and processes intended to reduce/end homelessness. As a result, there has been a paradigm shift

from treatment first to housing first approach. The treatment first approach expected citizens to first seek treatment for their possible illnesses, addictions or other social/health problems that may have led to homelessness before qualifying to be assessed by a social worker to determine if the citizen is ready for housing. Whereas nowadays the housing first approach, aims at first providing homeless citizens with housing, then combining housing provision with other services and support systems based on individual needs to help them stay in their own apartments. Despite heavily funded methods, approaches and policies adopted by the Danish government aimed at reducing homelessness (see Hansen, 2010), homelessness in Denmark still increased by 33% between 2009-2017 (Benjaminsen, 2018).

1.3 The welfare home Svenstrupgård

Svenstrupgård is an institution for adult homeless citizens. Services are provided and funded by Aalborg municipality under the job and welfare department, overseen by the center for social efforts. The institution was first created in 1709 as a poor house in Aalborg and relocated to Svenstrup in 1983. Svenstrupgård offers temporary accommodation to homeless adults who because of a variety of social issues (drug use, mental illness, lack of social networks etc.) face challenges to live in their own home. Svenstrupgård has the capacity to offer temporal accommodation to about 89 citizens plus 12 permanent accommodations at the alternative nursing home department (Det Alternative Plejehjem- DAP). Services are provided under sections 110, 107 and 108 of the act on housing offer. The institution also owns a workshop where it runs an activation program for its residents under section 103, 104 and 105 of the act on protected employment activity and social services (Aalborg Kommune, 2023).

Residents all have a social worker at the institution with whom they are expected to collaborate towards their goals and wishes for their next home. The institution provides residents with shelter, necessities, and a framework for activation. Social workers guide, support, motivate, and help residents when needed. Residents are expected to abide by the rules of the institution, interact with their social workers and actively collaborate with them amongst other professionals during their stay. Social workers are required to help residents uncover resources and challenges with the aim of finding a suitable home for them. Only homeless citizens with a CPR number (legal residence in Denmark) can be accommodated at the institution (Aalborg Kommune, 2023).

1.4 Problem statement

I carried out this study based on my curiosity to explore and learn more about social work interactions at the welfare home Svenstrupgård. I conducted my field study at Svenstrupgård. Field study here refers to the module “field study” which was part of this master’s programme, during which we had to practically visit an institution and experience their practice with service users. During this time, I learned that one of the main challenges at Svenstrupgård was motivating service users to show up at the workshops. The primary function of social workers at this institution is to help service users uncover their resources and challenges to help them find a suitable home within a short time. Another function of social workers is to motivate service users towards activation. On the other hand, service users are expected to participate in a dialogue, actively collaborate with social workers, take part in agreed meetings, comply with house rules and guidelines etc. This inspired me to investigate the topics of discussion during social work interactions and how they achieve these predetermined goals.

Due to the task centered nature of social work practice at this institution (finding a suitable home in a short time and motivating clients towards activation), I wondered if this may result in differences in goals and agendas of social work interactions between service users and social workers. This is because service users at this institution are not only homeless, but they also deal with mental health issues, substance use/abuse amongst other social problems. According to Coulshed and Orme (2012) people with a variety of social problems (people in crisis) cannot easily conceptualize their problems or possible solutions without heavily depending on the social worker. They are also not ready for an energetic, problem solving, equitable collaborative relationship with the social worker and may not be able to quickly stick to agreements or a plan. The goal of task-centered practice is predetermined rather than dependent on the holistic overall recovery of service users. Furthermore, it can be very challenging for service users dealing with a variety of social issues to cope with the demands of a task centered approach (Coulshed and Orme, 2012). This made me wonder how consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved during social work interactions with service users at Svenstrupgård.

Since accommodation is temporary at Svenstrupgård and social workers are required to adopt a task centered approach and help clients move out to their own apartments and get involved in an activation program within a short time, I wondered how their different roles during this process

can affect the dynamics of social work interactions and how social workers and service users present themselves to each other during social work interactions. I also learned during field studies that there are often threatening situations, conflicts, and violence at the institution due to several reasons e.g., service users' dissatisfaction with services and/or service providers, drug use resulting to violence and mental health reasons.

It is based on this background that this study uses Svenstrupgård as a case study in examining social work interactions, by acquiring empirical evidence from social workers and service users at the institution, with the aim of answering the research questions.

1.5 Purpose statement

As mentioned earlier, the way in which social workers interact with service users can greatly impact the collaborative process, social work outcomes and how service users feel about services and social workers. The purpose for this study is to examine social work interactions between social workers and service users at Svenstrupgård, with the aim of identifying main topics discussed during interactions, how service users and social workers present themselves to each other when discussing these topics and how consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved. My hope is that this study helps micro level social workers and the participants of this study to engage in a critical reflection on how they interact in practice and how these interactions may influence the outcomes of social work. By social work interactions at the micro level, I mean interpersonal interactions between social workers and service users, aimed at promoting well-being. I'm hoping that my findings will guide social workers to interact with service users in a way that fosters collaborative processes, social work outcomes and increase service users' satisfaction with social services and service providers.

1.6 Research questions

- What are the main topics of discussion during interactions?
- How do service users and service providers present themselves to each other?
- How consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved during interactions?

2. METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is the approach which a researcher chooses to carry out research. Methodology is a vital part in research because it documents how the research was conducted, which helps establish the study's credibility. Different approaches are required to meet different research needs. This could involve a variety of data collection methods, such as qualitative and quantitative approaches. This diversity in methodology, reflects the diverse research objectives and research issues investigated with the aim of evaluating, informing policy, improving practice and quality of services (Joubert & Webber, 2020).

2.1 Research design

This study uses qualitative research approach to acquire data for this study. *“There are no right or wrong methods. There are only methods that are appropriate to your research topic and the model with which you are working”* (Silverman, 2022, p.210). Therefore, the aim of the research and the type of data the researcher wants to analyze determines the research method that will best meet the research goals. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) define qualitative research as:

“...a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 43)

Creswell (2013) adds to the above definition by placing emphasis on qualitative research as a process that begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks, proceeds to procedures associated with studying social/human problems and the meaning people attribute to these problems. Data is collected in the natural settings where these problems are experienced

and analyzed to establish patterns and themes which informs the research outcome (Creswell, 2013).

Therefore, to answer my research questions, it was crucial to collect data from Svenstrupgård which is the natural setting where social work interactions take place in this study. It was also important to explore the experiences and viewpoints of both social workers and service users on the phenomenon under study. This exploration is vital because their experiences are influenced by variables that cannot be measured. Observing social work interactions in this setting, chatting with, and interviewing social workers and service users involved in these interactions and drawing on their experiences, helped me gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.2 Data collection method

Observations and interviews were used to acquire empirical data for this study. I conducted the initial set of observations which lasted five days in October 2022 during our study module “field study” at Svenstrupgård. After sending my research proposal to the institution’s manager, I agreed with them that I will collaborate with the institution including some social workers and service users for this final thesis. I also did some additional observations on the 23rd 24th and 25th of January 2023. I conducted interviews with service users on the 24th and with social workers on the 25th of January. Observations and interviews were conducted at Svenstrupgård to examine social work interactions between adult homeless service users and social workers. My first observations in October impacted my interview guide in that I asked questions based on what I had observed. Spending time with interviewees during field study also helped build rapport which facilitated interviews.

This study assumes that the way social workers interact with service users can greatly impact the collaborative process, social work outcomes and how service users feel about services and social workers.

I was granted access and permission to conduct this study by the manager at Svenstrupgård and I signed a confidentiality agreement. Two service users and two social workers consented to be interviewed for this study. All other service users and social workers present at the workshop where I carried out my observations were informed about the study and consented to observations. One

of the main factors of this ethnographic study is that participants must have experienced the phenomenon being examined for the study and much have interacted with each other over time (Creswell, 2013). All participants have experienced different types of interactions between social workers and service users at this institution.

Observation is a very important method of collecting data in social research. Observations allows the researcher to collect data through observing characteristics, behaviours, and social interactions. When collecting data through observation, the researcher must watch whatever is being studied carefully. Observations can be carried out in different ways depending on the researcher's approach. Gary (2009) discusses two types of observations. Structured observation and unstructured observation. Structured observation is a systemic data collection method whereby, the researcher observes whatever is being observed just as a witness, informally but methodically recording important aspects, characteristics, behaviours, or elements relevant to what is being studied without direct involvement with the participants.

During unstructured observations, the researcher submerges themselves into the situation that is being studied, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of what is being studied. This involves taking detailed notes about what is observed. Unstructured observations aim at having a deeper understanding about the different roles individuals or groups assume and how these roles play themselves out on the stage of life. For example, during my observations for this study, I listened, watched, observed nonverbal communication, and took notes about how social workers interact with homeless service users (Gary, 2009, p. 186).

I gathered field notes by physically attending and conducting both structured and unstructured observations of naturally occurring interaction between social workers and service users at the workshops at Svenstrupgård. I conducted *unstructured observations* in October 2022, as a participant observer, participating in activities at the workshop together with participants and *structured observations* as a nonparticipant observer later in January 2023, watching and taking notes from a distance. There was an average of nine service users and four social workers present during observations.

I also conducted semi structured interviews which were audio recorded and transcribed using otter.ai. I developed an interview guide (see appendix) as recommended by Creswell (2013) to help the interview stay within the questions guiding the study. Questions asked during interviews

were open-ended. Open-ended questions can motivate narratives to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, several follow-up questions came up during the interviews based on the respondents' answers. Interviews for this study were short probably due to language barrier. Each interview lasted about 15 to 30 minutes. I realised interviews could have been longer if Danish was the medium of communication between researcher and participants. However, I acquired a lot of fieldnotes data and interviews were short but informative. I conducted one on one interviews with interviewees to avoid confidentiality issues that may arise in group interviews.

Both service users and social workers in this study have personal experiences from interacting with each. My aim of using interviews in addition to observations was to gain an insight into the participants experiences from interacting with each other. I can only learn about their experiences with interacting with each other by talking with them. I can't learn about their personal experiences simply by observing their interactions. According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) as cited in Creswell & Poth (2018, p. 163), knowledge is produced through the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee aimed at understanding the world from the interviewees perspective and uncovering the meaning of their lived experiences. This is relevant in this study because my research findings are based on participants experiences of interacting with each other which other. Interviews also create an opportunity for participants to reflect on the phenomenon under study.

2.3 Sampling

Participants in this study are social workers working with homeless adult service users and the service users themselves at the Svenstrupgård. I used purposeful sampling strategy to recruit interviewees for this study. Through purposeful sampling, the researcher selects the setting and individuals/groups for the study because they can purposefully inform the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sampling was done at Svenstrupgård, after gaining access and permission to carry out the study. The inclusion criteria were homeless citizens who can speak English, have lived, and worked at the institution for at least three months and were willing to participate in the study based on informed consent.

I used the big net approach of purposeful sampling in an ethnographic study as recommended by Fetterman (2010) whereby, I initially interacted with everyone present at the workshop during my observations and then selected participants who could best inform the research inquiry and help provide empirical evidence that could answer the research question.

According to Gary (2009) the participants of a study should be a manageable sample that is representative of the population which the study is about. The number of participants was four interviewees $n=4$. Two male social workers, one female service user and one male service user. However, an average of nine service users and four social workers were present at the workshop during observations. Participants were between the ages of 35-50. This is a manageable sample that is representative enough of the population of homeless service users and social workers at Svenstrupgård, however it also has its limitations which I will discuss subsequently in this study.

2.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis requires the researcher to utilize cognitive processes in categorizing research findings and discerning patterns and themes. The process of data analysis in qualitative research begins at the onset of data collection. During data analysis the researcher uncovers meaning from what they have observed, heard, and experienced (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011).

Data for this study includes text data (transcripts from audio recorded interviews and field notes from my observations). This data has been organized into themes through the process of coding as recommended by Creswell (2013) and will be represented in discussions within the epistemological and theoretical interpretive framework of this study (see chapter 4). Coding means that data has been reduced into meaningful segments and names have been given to these segments. Furthermore, these segments have been combined into broader categories (themes). Themes are supported by evidence in data. This method of interpreting data is called thematic analysis i.e., interpreting data through the process of selecting codes and constructing themes. This method is appropriate when aiming to understand experiences, perspectives etc. (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

2.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues and standards must be critically considered in all research (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Researchers must consider ethical issues during the process of planning designing and carrying out a research, and plan how these issues will be addressed (Creswell, 2013).

This study makes several ethical considerations at different stages of this research process as recommended by Creswell & Poth (2018).

Prior to starting the research, I acquired permission to carry out the study from the manager at Svenstrupgård. I sent a copy of my research proposal in which I discussed the purpose of the study and how I plan to carry out the study to the manager. We also had a face-to-face meeting during which we discussed practical issues about carrying out the study, potential participants of the study and confidentiality issues.

Informed consent is mandatory for all research involving identifiable subjects. Discussions regarding informed consent must be grounded in the ethical principle of autonomy that involves the notion of the individual or a group of people with decision making capacity (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). According to Beck (2004) as cited in Streubert & Carpenter (2011 p. 61) *“informed consent means that participants have adequate information regarding the research; are able capable of comprehending the information; and have the power of free choice, enabling them to consent voluntarily to participate in the research or decline participation”*.

At the beginning of this study the manager and I discussed the purpose of the study with participants (social workers and service users) present during observations and they consented to participate in the study. The time I spent at the institution during observations helped create rapport with service users and social workers which facilitated the process of finding willing interviewees. I discussed the following with participants: what the study is about? why is it being carried out? what is the aim of the study? how is the research process going to look like? where will the final product be published? how will recorded audio, transcripts be processed and stored during/after the study or destroyed after the study and in what time frame? how will anonymity and confidentiality be ensured? etc. Interviewees were informed that participation was voluntary, and they have the right to withdraw at any stage if they don't want to proceed. Interviewees accepted to participate in the study based on informed consent. This aspect was considered through purposive sampling to ensure that service users selected were able to make autonomous choices.

I discussed issues about confidentiality and anonymity with participants at the beginning of this study. The principle of doing good and not causing harm also applies to ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for research participants. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in research means that any information provided by participants will not be reported in the manner that identifies them and will not be made accessible to others (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). I did not ask for interviewees names during the interviews, and I have used numbers to identify them in this study.

I was aware of the power imbalance that may exist between the researcher and participants especially service users in this study. Creswell (2013) recommends that potential power imbalance needs to be acknowledged during the interview process. Creswell further recommends that building trust and avoiding leading questions can help remove some of these power imbalances. Spending time and interacting with the service users and social workers during field studies helped build rapport between myself and the participants in this study and interviews felt relaxed and natural.

Another ethical consideration I made in this study is how I store data and how I will dispose of it after the study is published. According to Creswell (2013) the approach to data storage depends on the type of information collected. For this study, I have audio recordings and interview transcripts on my computer and fieldnotes in my notebook. These will be deleted and destroyed after publication.

Finally, data must be interpreted honestly. The results for this study have been presented to participants to determine that I represented their perspectives accurately. According to Richards and Schwartz (2002) this procedure can help verify that there were no serious misinterpretations or omissions of critical information.

2.6 Strengths and limitations of this study

It is important to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of this study and take these factors into consideration in this study and in future studies to help improve research processes and research outcomes.

2.6.1 Strengths

This study obtained vital empirical evidence through observations and interviews. An in-depth analysis of participants experiences was conducted which helped shed light on social work interactions with homeless service users at the welfare home Svenstrupgård, which is pertinent to the purpose of this study. This empirical evidence obtained from the natural setting in which social workers and service users interact adds to the credibility of the outcome of this study. The experiences of participants in this study enriches the findings because they are based on participants' experiences with interacting with each other rather than on my assumptions.

This study also encourages social workers and service users to critically reflect on their interactions with each other in practice and how these interactions affect the outcomes and of social work practice.

Making use of qualitative approach in this study also created an opportunity for the voices and experiences of both social workers and service users to be heard in research. Ethical considerations were made to enhance the quality of this study.

The outcome of this study gives a dynamic insight into social work interactions with homeless service users in the Danish context which is empirically useful for social work practice and social work discourses at the micro level.

2.6.2 Limitations

Cultural differences and language barrier is a limitation to this study. This is because cultural differences can affect non-verbal communication that I observed during interactions. Therefore, there is a possibility for misinterpretations of service users or social workers non-verbal communication during interactions. Language barrier between researcher and participants limited the flow of communication which may have limited some critical information for data analysis. Only English-speaking participants were included in the sample, however English is not their first language and I observed during interviews that some participants struggled to express themselves fluently in English. I realised interviews could have been much longer and more informative if Danish was the medium of communication between researcher and participants.

Using purposive sampling to include only service users with the ability to make autonomous decisions and with significant abilities to make decisions based on informed consent, limits the study because service users with severe substance abuse and mental health issues were excluded from this study. I assume that social work interactions with service users with severe substance abuse problems and mental health problems has its own unique challenges which I did not have the opportunity to explore.

Furthermore, service users or social workers communication, behaviour and overall interaction may change when they are aware that they are participating in a research project and their interactions are being observed and interviews recorded.

Even though this qualitative study is relevant in exploring the varied perspectives, experiences, and narratives of social workers and service users about social work interactions in an institutional setting, the research method limits the study because findings of the study can be less generalisable due to the limited sample size. However, the findings are relevant in understanding social work interactions of social workers and homeless service users in this context.

3. EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A researcher can take different epistemological positions when conducting research. The researchers epistemological position underlies the fundamental beliefs and values that guide how the researcher thinks and investigates the phenomenon under study. Creswell & Poth (2018) explain epistemology as that which counts as knowledge and how it is justified. The epistemological position of a researcher refers to their stance on what knowledge is, how it is acquired, and what qualifies as valid knowledge. This position can influence the researcher's choice of research methods, data collection techniques, and interpretation of findings. For example, a researcher who believes that knowledge is objective and can be obtained through scientific methods may prioritize quantitative data collection methods, while a researcher who believes that knowledge is subjective and contextual may prioritize qualitative methods. It is

important for researchers to be aware of their own philosophical assumptions and to be transparent about them in their research. This helps to ensure that the research is conducted rigorously and ethically, and that the results are interpreted appropriately (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Creswell & Poth (2018) also discuss different philosophical positions embedded within interpretive frameworks which qualitative researchers can apply when interpreting data. These include positivism, naturalism, social constructivism amongst others. According to positivist framework, the research data can give the researcher facts about human behaviour and attitudes i.e., it can be used for testing theories with the aim of generating factual knowledge. In a naturalist framework, research data is provided in collaboration with participants as subjects who actively construct their social worlds. Data that is generated with this framework presents an accurate insight into the lived experiences of research participants. In a social constructivism framework, people develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and multiple. This study adopts a social constructivist framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1 Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a theoretical perspective on social science that emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in the development of knowledge and understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978). According to this view, people construct meaning through their interactions with others and with their environment, and knowledge is not simply a reflection of an objective reality but is shaped by the cultural and historical context in which it is produced. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social constructivism suggests that reality is socially constructed, and that knowledge is not simply discovered but is actively created through social interactions and discourse. Vygotsky (1978) similarly emphasizes the role of social interaction in the development of higher mental functions, arguing that learning occurs through collaboration with others. This can involve collaboration, negotiation, and debate as individuals work together to make sense of their experiences and develop shared understanding.

In terms of social work practice, Creswell (2013) explains that research participants e.g., service users and social workers in this study construct meaning of their situation, this meaning is typically formed by interacting with other persons. Therefore, constructivist researchers often

look at the processes of interaction among individuals in specific contexts in which they live and work.

The social constructivist framework focuses on specific contexts in which people live to understand their perspectives which have been constructed through the geographical, historical, and cultural settings in which they interact. Participants in this study have constructed meaning to the research phenomenon through their experiences with interacting with each other at Svenstrupgård, I have in turn constructed meaning to the phenomenon under study by interacting with the participants in this study.

I acknowledged and addressed the risk of research bias which can occur when the researcher's values and beliefs influence the research process or findings. My worldview as a researcher is shaped by my upbringing, experiences, and views which can affect how I interpret data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I took steps to minimize the risk of bias in this study. For example, I acknowledged that cultural differences could affect non-verbal communication that I observed during interactions. To minimize the likelihood of misinterpretations, I incorporated interviews as a second method of data collection. This created the opportunity to clear up any potential misunderstandings. I also asked open ended questions during interviews as opposed to leading questions. I interpret data objectively and state participants responses using their own words and phrases.

3.2 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is the “blueprint” in research. It provides a concept or set of concepts and assumptions that guide the research process and help in the analysis, interpretation, and understanding of the research results. A theoretical framework is an essential component of research that provides a structure for the research process, helps to ensure the validity and reliability of findings, and allows researchers to make meaningful contributions to the field (Grant, & Osanloo, 2015).

Social work interactions can greatly impact how service users and social workers construct meaning to their situation, their challenges, and possible solutions. This study investigates the main topics of discussion during social interactions, how service users and social workers present

themselves to each other and how consensus and collaborative problem-solving is achieved during interactions through the lenses of social constructivism and Foucault's theory of power.

My decision to use Foucault's theory of power as a framework for this study was mostly informed by the empirical data for this study. During my observations and while examining my empirical data, I could identify the ways in which power is produced and reproduced through discourse, social interactions, and power dynamics within social interactions. In addition, Svenstrupgård as an institution where service users and service providers interact, creates a social context in which power exists.

3.2.1 Foucault's Theory of Power

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, psychologist, social theorist, and historian who is well known for his analysis of power and its workings in society. Foucault argues that power is not a fixed entity that resides solely in the hands of those who hold traditional positions of authority such as government officials or corporate executives. Instead, power is something that operates at all levels of society shaping the ways in which individuals and groups behave and interact with each other (Mills, 2003).

Foucault defines power as *"...some-thing which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation...Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application"* (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

The key element in the above definition of power is that Foucault conceptualizes power as a system of relations spread throughout society rather than a set of relations between the powerful and the powerless. His concept of power helps us to not only conceptualize power itself but also the role that individuals and groups play within power relations with others and with institutions.

Foucault's theory of power is largely concerned with the relationship between social structures, institutions and individuals or groups of people. Foucault is critical of the notion that power is something possessed by a group of people, or an institution aimed at oppressing or constraining. He conceptualizes power as an ever-present force that permeates all social interactions, relationships, and structures (Foucault, 1980).

Foucault's theory of power is multi-faceted. He moves thinking about power beyond oppression of the powerless by the powerful to thinking about power in the way that power operates within everyday relations and interactions between people and institutions. Foucault emphasizes the importance of analyzing power in terms of its effects on social relations, rather than simply in terms of who holds it or how it is exercised. He also argues that power is not necessarily visible or overt but can operate in subtle ways through various mechanisms including discourse (the language and symbols that shape our understanding of the world), knowledge (the ways in which we categorize and understand information), institutions (such as homeless institutions, prisons, schools, and hospitals) and practices that shape our beliefs, values, and behaviors. Power is not necessarily repressive but can also be productive by creating new forms of knowledge, subjectivities, social relationships and shaping the ways in which we live and work. That is, power doesn't just repress or limit individuals, but creates new forms of subjectivity and identity (Foucault, 1980).

Foucault also argues that power is not simply a negative force that oppresses individuals and limits their freedom. Instead, power is something that is constantly negotiated and contested, as individuals and groups resist or challenge dominant power relations. This resistance can take many forms, including collective action, social movements, and alternative discourses. Despite power being pervasive and diffuse, it is not totalizing or all-encompassing. There is room for resistance and struggle within power relations (Foucault, 1982).

According to Foucault, power operates through disciplinary techniques. His notion of "disciplinary power" refers to a form of power that operates through institutions, such as homeless institutions, prisons, schools, hospitals, and other systems of discipline which regulates individual behavior and impose social norms and expectations. Disciplinary power is not only exercised by people in positions of authority, but it is also internalized by individuals who come to monitor and regulate their own behavior, conforming to the norms and rules of the institution. Foucault argues that disciplinary power operates through several techniques, including surveillance, examination, and normalization. For example, in a prison, inmates are constantly under surveillance, which serves to control their behavior and reinforce the power of the institution. In schools, students are subject to examination and evaluation, which reinforces the authority of the teacher and the institution. Normalization refers to the creation of an idealized norm of conduct (disciplinary power).

Disciplinary power is not simply repressive but rather it produces and shapes individual subjectivity and identity. It operates through a complex network of power relations that are diffuse and decentralized, rather than concentrated in the hands of a few individuals. According to Foucault, disciplinary power is a fundamental feature of modern societies, and it is deeply implicated in the production of knowledge and the shaping of social relations (Foucault, 1977).

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Interviews and observations were used to obtain empirical evidence for this study and the method of data analysis was thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a commonly used method in qualitative research which involves a process of systematically coding and categorizing data to identify key themes patterns and meaning. Thematic analysis can be done through a range of techniques for example inductive, deductive, or theoretical approaches. This study uses the Inductive thematic analysis technique, which involves a data-driven approach, where themes and patterns emerged from both my field notes and interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

One of the key benefits of using thematic analysis method in analysing qualitative data is its flexibility as it can be used in a variety of qualitative data sources, including interviews and field notes. Furthermore, thematic analysis allows for a rich, detailed understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. It can help generate new insights about human interactions, experiences, and behaviours making it a valuable tool in social and healthcare research (Braun & Clarke, 2019). However, thematic analysis also has its limitations. For example, the interpretation of themes can be subjective and influenced by the researcher's preconceptions. In addition, the process of coding and categorizing data can be very time consuming (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After going through my data and assigning labels that sum up what is going on during social work interactions at Svenstrupgård or what is being said, I developed three themes based on these labels. My analysis has therefore been constructed around these three themes namely:

1. Topics of social work interactions
2. Interpersonal dynamics of social work interactions
3. Collaborative social work interactions

In the following sections, I present my research results under the above-mentioned themes, then analyze the material by having a deeper reflection under each developed theme within the theoretical frameworks of this study with the aim of answering my research questions.

I use abbreviations in this section as follows: service user (SU) and social worker (SW). I also use numbers to identify participants. For example, SU1, SU2, SW1 and SW2. I have added a few clarifications and redactions in parenthesis within my interview data.

4.1 Topics of social work interactions

In this section I discuss the main topics of social work interactions at Svenstrupgård based on the results of this study. Social work interactions at Svenstrupgård are mainly based on the following topics: housing, house rules, money, work, and substance use/abuse.

4.1.1 Housing

All service users at Svenstrupgård have experienced different types of challenges that have led to homelessness. Most of them are staying temporarily at the institution while looking for permanent housing. Others have recently moved into their new homes, however, are still receiving services from the institution to help them maintain their homes. As a result, most social work interactions involve housing-related topics.

Excerpts from interviews

SW1: "...it can be anything. Yesterday, I visited a guy who's collecting things he finds in the street. And so, his house gets filled up with garbage very quickly. And we have to work about finding a solution, firstly, so that he won't bring things home. But then he has to sort what's it called? sort, which things to keep so that he can live in his house again...this is a different group

of citizens, they have just moved from here to their own apartments, so we help them to be able to stay in their apartments.”

SW1: “... if you live here, we want you to move to your own apartment as soon as possible. This is not a permanent place, we are discussing a lot about helping you find your own apartment...”

SW2: “...the main thing is to provide temporal housing and support citizens during the process of finding their next home, but we also do other things during their time here...”

SU1: “...I have just moved to my own apartment, but I still come here every day... it sounds a little strange, but it's because there's support, I can get to my rent every month.”

SU1: “...I have to be able to stay in this apartment and because of my (redacted)I cannot do so on my own. So, I need help with doing things the right way, you know, step 1,2,3. Sometimes I start with three and it doesn't work. So, they are just helping me to get the things done in the right order and telling me how I can do it the most easy way.”

SU2. “... I just came from (place redacted) and I don't have a house. That is why I am here. I just need some money to get my own place, so I need help to find a job and to find house.”

Excerpts from field notes

I observed that the physical housing consisted of “hallways” (several single rooms on both sides divided by a hallway in the middle). Several service users share the same bathroom and toilet, and the bathroom tap was the only place where service users living in the hallways could get water from (including drinking water). In addition to the hallways there are also small apartments known as cottages. The cottages were peaceful and clean, at least those that I visited.

Housing is one of the main topics of social work interactions at Svenstrupgård. These interactions are mainly centered around finding affordable housing for service users, supporting them in maintaining housing and improving the housing conditions at the institution.

Only citizens with a CPR number can be housed at Svenstrupgård and the main goal for social workers is to support service users to move to their own housing as soon as possible.

4.1.2 House rules

Svenstrupgård has several expectations of their service users. The institution explains that there are several people living at the institution at the same time. As a result, rules and regulations must be established to ensure the smooth functioning of the institution. Hence, house rules are a topic of social work interactions for all service users from the very beginning of their stay.

Excerpts from interviews.

SW1. *“...you often have conflicts because you have house rules that we have to uphold. And that's a conflict situation, you don't want to abide by the rules, I have to either make sure you abide by the rules, or make sure you're not in the house because we have 84 people, I think living here 75, 84 and we all have to be able to live here. So, there are many conflicts...”*

SW2. *“...We have expectations from the citizens. We are a lot of people, so we need to talk about some rules, what you can do what you cannot do, these can sometimes cause conflict, but I have not seen much down here (the workshop), there is more over there (the hallways). I am guiding them according to the rules...”*

SU1. *“...I like it here, I do not have problems with people here. As long as you follow the rules, you will not have any problems. Some people have problems because they do not follow the rules which can create problems with other citizens and with the staff. They are not difficult rules though, I think every community needs rules so everyone can live well...”*

SU2. *“...It is ok, but I just want to find a job and my own place. I like to do what I want when I want but here they tell you what to do...I want to eat when I want and what I want, and go out and come back when I want, I do not want to inform anyone if I have guests, things like that are difficult here.”*

Excerpts from field notes

I was informed by the staff about some of the expectations they have for service users. Service users are expected to collaborate with staff and participate in agreed meetings. They are expected to be quiet after 11:00 PM. They are expected to comply with the house rules, some of which

include: a limit to the amount of home inventory they can have during their stay, rules about cleanliness and hygiene. Service users are not allowed to have kitchen appliances for example microwaves, coffee machines, and fridges in their rooms because of the risk of fire hazards. Every day, the staff checks on everyone in each room to see how they are doing. There are rules about visiting hours and service users must inform staff about arrival and departure of guests. If service users need to spend the night out of the institution it can only happen by permission from the staff and absence for more than three days will result in immediate discharge. Weapons are not allowed and there are rules regarding use of substances.

Social workers have the task of informing service users about the rules of the institution and enforcing, monitoring, and making sure that service users are abiding by the rules. Social workers must guide the service users and support them if they face challenges in abiding by the rules. This can sometimes cause conflicts.

The fact that there are less conflicts at the workshops than in the hallways is most likely because service users who come to work there have some structure in their lives and can abide by the rules.

4.1.3 Money

Financial strain is one of the major causes of homelessness. Preventive efforts must be implemented to help service users avoid homelessness once they have moved into their own homes. This is done by providing resources and helping them achieve financial security. Therefore, one of the main topics of social work interactions is money and other financial related topics.

Excerpts from interviews

SW1. “...but mostly *it is economics, it's debt. The people here have low incomes and high debts. And Aalborg is now an expensive city in an expensive country. So, it's very hard to make money last the whole month...*”

SW1. *“...There are many things you need to be able to do to maintain your own apartment. One of those things is paying your house rent and having the money to do so on time. So, we are talking a lot about that because my main aim is that you don't end up back here in Svenstrupgård.*

SW2. *“We are talking a lot about money, how they're making their money. If they have problems, to make the money last, so they have more money in the beginning of the month and have money for food in the end of the month. How can we motivate them here to come to work? where they have an opportunity to earn some money here at the workshop and find out how they are doing here at work.”*

SW2. *“...we try to help them get some food, if they haven't been eating for two or three days, because they don't have money...”*

SU1. *“...Yes, it's about getting a new bank account and Friday, I have a meeting with (name redacted), and we are going to make a list of everything I must put into my new budget. You know, I have an account only for what I need, my rent, electricity and TV, telephone, and so. I always must take care of these first”*

SU2. *“... I just came from (place redacted) and I don't have a house. That is why I am here. I just need some money to get my own place, so I need help to find a job and to find house”*

Excerpts from field notes

Service users at Svenstrupgård have a variety of social problems that have led to homelessness. Most of these problems are centered around money/finances. For example, some service users have lost their source of income hence could not afford their home, some are dealing with substance abuse issues and most of their income is used to support their addictions, some have moved to Aalborg from the Danish colony Greenland in search of better opportunities.

Social work interactions are aimed at helping service users in finding affordable housing and identifying their resources to improve their financial situation, so they would be able to afford rent and stay in their apartments after leaving the institution. Interactions around this topic also involve providing financial assistance to service users, job training, employment services, helping them in maintaining or acquiring skills and resources necessary to find and maintain employment, and motivating them to want to earn money through employment. Social workers help service users in creating a financial plan that considers their income and expenses so that they can pay their bills on time and still have money for necessities throughout the month. To acquire and maintain an apartment, service users must have the money to pay for the apartment. Therefore, social work interactions are focused on helping them earn money and spend money in a way that they will be able to afford their housing expenses and avoid ending up back at the institution.

4.1.4 Work

As mentioned earlier in this study Svenstrupgård owns a workshop where it runs an activation program for service users under section 103, 104 and 105 of the act on protected employment activity and social services. All service users are offered the opportunity and encouraged to work at the workshops. Some service users participate in activation programs outside the institution through the job center. As a result, work is one of the main topics of social work interactions.

Excerpts from interviews

SW1. *“...it is very important for our citizens here to have a routine, to have a structure in their lives so when they wake up they come here to the workshop it creates some kind of structure for them. Here they work and they learn how to wake up in the morning and go to work and even when they leave from here some of them still come back here if they don't have a job yet or they*

do not have something to do through the job center. Activation is something that is very important within social work in Denmark...”

SW2. “...How can we motivate them here to come to work? Where they have an opportunity to earn some money here at the workshop and find out how they are doing here at work.”

SW1. “...leaving their rooms and coming to work is very important for our citizens here, if they are here for four hours, we are happy that they are not in their rooms during those four hours doing drugs. For some of the citizens it is great if they can just come to work only for one hour or just showing up...”

SU1. “...I will keep on working and I am actually paying for working it sounds a little strange, but it's because there's support, I can get to my rent every month. The money we earn here. The system will withdraw from my support. So, I am paying for getting here every day and getting home. It's okay, I love it, I keep going.”

SU2. “...This place (the workshop) is good because I can make some extra money. I do not have anything to do in my room and I want to work so that I will soon be able to live in my own apartment.”

Excerpts from field notes

When service users move into Svenstrupgård, they are given a tour of the workshop and presented the different available tasks. If service users do not have any activities e.g., employment or studies outside of Svenstrupgård, they are expected to participate in the activation programs at the workshops. If service users receive unemployment benefits, they are not allowed to take part in any paid employment without a specific agreement from their A-kasse (unemployment insurance). The tasks are usually easy to do for example, assembling of goods for retail, looking after the garden and greenhouse, carpentry workshop, metal and machine workshop, kitchen, and cleaning tasks. These workshops are located at the institution with working hours from Monday to Thursday 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM, Friday 8:00 AM to 12:00 PM and payment every Friday at 11:30 AM. Service users are paid 15kr/hour because they receive benefits from the state. This amount is low enough, so it does not affect their benefits and serves

as an incentive for them to come to work. They have coffee breaks together every day at 9:30 AM and lunch breaks at 12 noon. One of the greatest challenges that social workers face is motivating service users to come to work. There is very low turnout for work, I observed that mainly the same people showed up for work every day with a few exceptions. Out of about 89 service users in temporary accommodation and 12 in permanent accommodation only an average of nine service users were present at the workshop during my time there. Working hours and tasks can be adapted to meet the needs of service users. The goal is to provide structure in the lives of service users, provide an opportunity for them to maintain their skills, learn new skills and test their skills which they can also utilize later in the labor market. Social workers are required to provide/supervise activation programs and encourage service users towards activation under the law on protected employment activity and social services. Social workers at this institution do not only highlight significant accomplishments, such as getting a job or an apartment. They recognize even the smallest progresses in the lives of service users such as simply showing up.

4.1.5 Substance use and abuse

Most service users at Svenstrupgård have experienced a variety of challenges that have resulted in homelessness. For example, substance use and abuse. Social workers wish to have honest and open dialogue with service users about their abuse of substances and offer different options to support those who would like to reduce or quit their use/abuse of substances. As a result, substance use, and abuse is one of the main topics of social work interactions at the institution.

Excerpts from interviews

SW1. *“...most of them have had many years of addiction to alcohol or drugs, or both. So, physically they are deteriorated, they have to be helped, they need help with many things in their*

lives. So, we try to help them the best we can, but it can be very challenging for us to interact with someone who is very high on drugs...”

SW1. *“...we try to motivate them to get help because if all the money is going to drugs and alcohol then they will end up back here...”*

SW2. *“When our citizens come here, most of them already are taking drugs and alcohol so we do not require them to stop taking drugs and alcohol when they are here. However, we have rules regarding drug and alcohol use which we expect them to follow. We are also actively trying to reduce harm that may result from drug use”*

SW2. *“Sometimes they come and talk about the alcohol problems and drug problems they have. We talk about how much they're drinking, how much they're smoking, which drugs they are taking ... I have an education, to talk about medical addiction, addiction problems with the citizens. Even if they do not want to stop, it is important that we are able to talk openly, talk about what they're doing and why they're doing it. That is the first step, then we can refer them to addiction treatment or offer different types of support if they want to stop or reduce their use of drugs and alcohol...”*

SU2. *“We are talking about housing, job, alcohol use, you know, just the things that can help me get my house and maintain it”*

Excerpts from field notes

Most service users at Svenstrupgård struggle with substance abuse related problems which in most cases has resulted in homelessness. The institution does not prohibit drug use however, they expect service users to collaborate with professionals during their stay despite their struggle with substance abuse. The institution has rules regarding drugs and alcohol consumption. Service users can only consume drugs/alcohol in their rooms and not in the common areas. Service users and their guests should not show signs of being under the influence of drugs and alcohol in the common areas and should not be a nuisance to others and the surroundings. Cigarettes can be consumed only in the smoking areas. Service users' stay can be canceled if their use/abuse of substances is a hindrance for them to comply with the rules or a hindrance for collaborating with

professionals. In some cases, the police are called to remove service users temporarily or permanently if their consumption of drugs and alcohol is a nuisance or causing a threatening situation for the staff and other residents. The institution uses the harm reduction approach in social work interactions with substance abusers. That is, they recognize that prohibiting drugs and alcohol is unrealistic for service users dealing with substance abuse. Service users who are addicted to alcohol can experience physical symptoms of alcohol withdrawal such as shaking, nausea when their blood alcohol level drops. In this case, it can be dangerous to stop drinking completely or too quickly without medical support and it is extremely challenging if not impossible to have constructive interaction with them during this time. In situations like these, professionals can offer low levels of alcohol to service users if they think that it will help the service user feel better or collaborate better. They also provide clean needles for drug use to service users.

Social workers do not actively try to deter drug use. Their goal is to motivate service users to take initiative and make changes themselves. Social workers offer encouragement, resources, and support to service users in spite of their substance abuse issues.

4.1.6 Reflections on topics of social work interactions

As presented above housing, house rules, money, work, and substance use/abuse are the main topics of social work interactions at Svenstrupgård. In this section, I reflect on these topics of social work interactions within the theoretical framework of this study.

As concerns housing, only citizens with a CPR number in Denmark can be housed at Svenstrupgård. This aspect of institutional power directly limits service users with whom social workers at the institution can interact with around these topics. This supports Foucault's (1980) concept of power as being pervasive and operating through institutions and social practices. When institutions limit the category of people who can receive their services, this can be seen as an exercise of power because it involves creating and enforcing rules and regulations that limit people who are eligible to access the resources and benefits provided by the institution. This exercise of power excludes for example, undocumented immigrants and other groups of immigrants without a CPR number from receiving services from Svenstrupgård. Foucault's theory of power inspires us as social workers to look at and be aware of broader social and

institutional structures that affect the lives of service users. By examining how institutions limit access to their services we can better understand ways in which power operates in society and work towards more equitable and inclusive social work interactions.

According to Benjaminsen and Christensen (2007) homelessness in Denmark is a result of both structural factors such as unemployment, availability of affordable housing, housing shortages and individual factors such as substance abuse. Benjaminsen and Christensen (2007) stress the importance of addressing both structural and individual factors during interventions against homelessness. These interventions occur at Svenstrupgård through different social work interactions. Social workers work directly with service users and homeless support services in helping service users find and maintain affordable housing.

House rules are a significant topic of social work interactions at Svenstrupgård and play an important role in determining how social workers interact with service users. SW2 explains that “... *We are a lot of people, so we need to talk about some rules, what you can do what you cannot do, ...*”. Social workers must interact with service users on this topic of house rules by informing them about the rules, making sure that they abide by the rules, talking with them if they break the rules and enforcing consequences. We can identify the social constructivism aspect of using rules to define what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a community.

While discussing human behavior in relation to power, Deacon (2002) argues that human beings are naturally under the control of power instilled within them by their environment. Foucault’s theory of power stipulates that when human action is being observed and monitored it compels individuals to behave as expected, guided by the rules of the institution. This notion of “disciplinary power” as discussed by Foucault (1977) refers to how institutions such as Svenstrupgård use this form of power to regulate the behavior of service users, impose social norms and expectations which influences the dynamics of social work interactions. SW1 explains that “...*I have to either make sure you abide by the rules, or make sure you're not in the house because we have 84 people, ... we all have to be able to live here...*”. Service users can then monitor and regulate their behavior to conform to the rules of the institution or resist against the rules which can cause conflict.

Social work interactions at Svenstrupgård therefore involves dealing with conflicts. When citizens do not abide by the rules it can cause conflict situations. SW1 points out that “...*you*

often have conflicts, because you have house rules that we have to uphold. And that's a conflict situation, you don't want to abide by the rules, I have to either make sure you abide by the rules, or make sure you're not in the house... ”. This affirms Foucault’s notion that resistance and struggle are possible within power relations (Foucault, 1982). This resistance does not necessarily have to be aggressive or threatening. For example, due to the rules of the institution and some of the limited freedom that result from them, SU2 wants to find a job and his own apartment quickly to avoid conforming to the rules when he moves out to his own place.

Social work interactions at Svenstrupgård centered on the topic of work, involve providing services and resources that help in providing structure and routine for service users. It also involves motivating service users to become active. The power of the law (section 103, 104 and 105 of the act on protected employment activity and social services) in Denmark also influences social work interactions at Svenstrupgård because social workers are obligated by the law to interact on this topic. The institution owns a workshop where it runs an activation program for its residents. Social workers at this institution do not only celebrate big achievements for the service users such as finding employment or an apartment. They also celebrate very small progresses or improvements in the service users lives such as coming to work even for just an hour or just simply showing up. Social workers expressed that it is great that service users are not using drugs when they are at work. Service users who show up for work at the workshops like coming to work for different reasons. For example, to earn some extra money, learn a skill, be active or just to pass time.

Regarding money, most service users at Svenstrupgård have low incomes and high debts. Social work interactions are aimed at helping service users identify their resources to improve their financial situation so that they will be able to afford rent and stay in their own homes after moving out from the institution. Social work interactions around money also involve providing financial assistance to service users, job training, activation services, helping service users maintain or acquire skills and resources needed to find and maintain employment and motivating citizens to want to earn money through employment. Social workers interact with service users in helping them create a financial plan so that they can take care of their bills on time and still have money for necessities throughout the month. To have and maintain housing, service users must have the money to pay for it therefore, social work interactions are geared towards helping

service users earn money or acquire necessary benefits and spend money in a way that they will be able to afford their housing expenses and avoid ending up back at the institution.

Social constructivism as discussed earlier in this study argues that people's reality is socially constructed by their social interactions in the world around them (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Silverman 2014). The social welfare structure in Denmark ensures that social welfare services are provided to everyone in need of these services. This includes the provision of housing to homeless citizens. This welfare structure has therefore socially constructed a society where homeless citizens can seek accommodation from institutions such as Svenstrupgård.

One can argue that the welfare state socially constructs a dependency culture by creating a society that allows individuals to rely on the state and municipalities rather than take responsibility of their own lives. According to Esping-Andersen (1990) welfare states can create a “welfare trap” in which some individuals become reliant on social welfare programs, services, benefits and lose motivation to work and be self-sufficient as can be seen in most cases at Svenstrupgård. Several social workers expressed that one of their biggest challenges at the workshop was motivating service users to come to work. SW2. “...*How can we motivate them here to come to work?*” therefore social workers must interact with service users in ways that motivate them to work. Similarly, Murray (1984) argues that welfare programs socially construct a culture of dependency that perpetuates poverty and undermines work ethic.

However, other scholars argue that the notion of welfare structures creating a dependency culture is a myth. Blank (1997) argues that welfare programs do not create dependency but rather provide necessary support to individuals and families in need. Katz (1990) supports this notion by stating that welfare programs provide a platform for social mobility and self-sufficiency rather than promoting dependency.

As concerns social work interactions on the topic of substance use/abuse, Benjaminsen and Christensen (2007) mention that the individual causes of homelessness such as substance abuse must be addressed along with social interventions. It is therefore inevitable and vital for social workers at Svenstrupgård to interact with service users on this topic. According to Ross (2011) there is a considerable self-disapproval as well as social disapproval in the use of labels such as “drug addict” or “alcoholic”. Therefore, it is vital for social workers to communicate with service users in a way that is not labeling. As presented earlier the goal of social work interactions on

this topic is to motivate service users through motivational communication with the aim of helping them explore their reasons of wanting to change their substance abuse behaviors as explained by SW1. “...we try to motivate them to get help because if all the money is going to drugs and alcohol then they will end up back here...”. Ross (2011) stresses the importance of service users coming to their own conclusions about the abuse of substances through social workers motivating them by drawing arguments for or against change from service users themselves. Ross (2011) calls this a specialist communication strategy of motivating service users to decide to make changes. SW2 “... I have an education, to talk about medical addiction, addiction problems with the citizens. Even if they do not want to stop, it is important that we are able to talk openly about what they're doing and why they're doing it. That is the first step, then we can refer them to addiction treatment or offer different types of support if they want to stop or reduce their use of drugs and alcohol... ”.

Barber (2002) discusses three themes to guide motivational interviewing in social work interactions these include: 1. Providing affirmation. That is, social workers should affirm service users' statements and feelings, show empathy during social work interactions, and carefully select which statements from the service user to reflect on and explore together with the service user and show positive affirmation about the need for change while reflecting and exploring these statements. 2. Encouraging service users in recognizing the divergence between their goals, values, and the reality of their current behavior. This requires social workers to interact with service users in a way that helps them clarify their goals and provide feedback in a non-judgmental empathetic and individualized manner on how their use/abuse of substances cannot be conducive to achieving their goals. 3. Providing all options to encourage feelings of self-efficacy to promote motivation. i.e., for service users to be motivated to change their behaviors towards substance abuse they must believe that there is a realistic possibility for change, and that they can make changes. All different options and available resources to support change should be discussed together with the service users (Barber, 2002 & Paylor, 2008).

Social workers and service users at the institution also make use of “disciplinary power” as discussed by Foucault (1977) during interactions around substance abuse. Social workers employ the institution's drug policy guidelines to manage and regulate service users' behavior. SW2 explains that “...we have rules regarding drug and alcohol use which we expect them to follow”.

Service users also internalize this notion of power to regulate their behavior when interacting with social workers as pointed out by SW1 “...*I do not have problems with people here. As long as you follow the rules, you will not have any problems...*”

Social work interactions with service users dealing with a variety of socioeconomic problems, such as homelessness and substance abuse can be challenging. However, there are several strategies that social workers at Svenstrupgård use when interacting with service users on different topics to help motivate and inspire positive change.

4.2 Interpersonal dynamics of social work interactions

In this section I discuss interpersonal dynamics of social work interactions at Svenstrupgård and present empirical evidence with the aim of examining how service users and social workers present themselves to each other. By interpersonal dynamics here I mean the way social workers and service users interact with each other during social work interactions. This involves for example their behaviors, emotions and attitudes that influence the way they communicate and relate to each other.

Excerpts from interviews

SW1. “...*most of them have had many years of addiction to alcohol or drugs, or both. So, physically they are deteriorated, they have to be helped, they need help with many things in their lives. So, we try to help them the best we can, but it can be very challenging for us to interact with someone who is very high on drugs...*”

SW2. “*I try to motivate them to talk about some problems, in the beginning they might not want to talk about some subjects like drug use but when they come here(workshop) more, it becomes easier to talk with our citizens (service users) since we are here working together and having coffee together. I want them to know I understand how they feel about something because it is important that we are able to talk about these subjects...*”

SU1. *“...I need help with doing things the right way, you know, step 1,2,3. Sometimes I start with three and it doesn't work. So, they are just helping me to get the things done in the right order and telling me how I can do it the most easy way.”*

SU1: *“I talk to them, and they listen to me and help me figure out what is the most important, yesterday I told (name redacted) what we need to do and what my problems are, and he helped me organise what I have to do. I can fix it myself you know, I just have to get help to see what's important and what's not.”*

SU2. *“...It is better to come to work here, as you can see, we are working together and drinking coffee together, it is better than sitting in my room and as I said I want to get at job quick and get my own house and I think they can help me...”*

Excerpts from field notes

Social work interactions I observed at Svenstrupgård were informal. It is worth noting that there are also one-on-one private, formal, and structured meetings held either in service users' homes or social workers offices which I did not have the opportunity to observe. Informal social work interactions here refer to unstructured conversations or interactions that social workers have with service users at the workshop. Social workers have their own office rooms within the workshop however they all work with service users in the same space at the workshop. They share the same break room with service users as well. Social workers at the workshop spend a lot of time with service users, working, taking breaks, and talking together. There is a lot of interaction going on in the workshop through communication (verbal and nonverbal). I frequently observed service users and social workers laughing with each other and being quite physically close to one another while working and discussing together.

Despite the wide range of social issues that service users face, both service users and social workers appeared to have positive views towards one another based on my observations. There was mutual support, encouragement, and appreciation. Some service users were very open with social workers about personal issues in my presence even though I was new there.

4.2.1 Reflections on interpersonal dynamics of social work interactions

Based on the results of this study in relation to interpersonal dynamics of social work interactions, social workers at Svenstrupgård present themselves to service users in an empathetic manner, as motivators, helpers, professionals but also as peers (colleagues) in the workshop. Social workers strive to build trust and rapport with service users. This is demonstrated through showing empathy, being non-judgmental, being respectful of service users' experiences and perspectives, and taking steps towards reducing power imbalances that exists between social workers and service users which can impact interpersonal dynamics. Communication is also identified in this study as a vital aspect of interpersonal dynamics in social work interactions.

According to Ross (2011), feelings can be portrayed verbally and nonverbally. Ross goes on to state that in whatever way feelings are communicated, social workers should receive these feelings in an open warm and receptive manner through effective communication and reflective listening. SW2 states that “...*I want them to know I understand how they feel about something because it is important that we are able to talk about these subjects...*”. Understanding and acknowledging service users' feelings and giving them the space to talk about these feelings is a demonstration of empathy.

Social workers at Svenstrupgård present themselves as motivators and helpers in their professional relationship with service users. Bogo (2006) Mentions that even though other aspects such as resources, social environment etc. are important in the helping process, interpersonal aspects of the helping process such as client centered interpersonal relationship between social workers and service users provide a crucial foundation upon which social work interventions are built. When social workers interact with service users, information is shared, perspectives and assessments are developed, interventions are planned and implemented. This helping relationship doesn't just happen, it is a process that involves different cycles of service users and social workers in a collaborative effort in promoting well-being.

As helpers and motivators social workers can help/motivate service users examine their needs, identify their strengths, abilities, and resources. They can also help identify challenges and problems that can interfere with service users achieving their goals. The aim of social work interactions is for social workers to engage in helping conversations that encourage and motivate

service users to reflect on their strengths and abilities, figure out issues they are struggling with and explore different ways and available resources in dealing with those issues with the aim of promoting well-being (Bogo 2006). This aspect is evident at Svenstrupgård as stated by SU1 *“I talk to them, and they listen to me and help me figure out what is the most important, yesterday I told (name redacted) what we need to do and what my problems are, and he helped me organise what I have to do. I can fix it myself, you know, I just have to get help to see what's important and what's not.”*

For these conversations to be productive the service users must feel safe and trust the social worker. The workshop at Svenstrupgård is an environment conducive for building trust and rapport between social workers and service users, due to the informal interactions that occur there. SW2. *“I try to motivate them to talk about some problems, in the beginning they might not want to talk about some subjects like drug use but when they come here(workshop) more, it becomes easier to talk with our citizens (service users) since we are here working together and having coffee together. I want them to know I understand how they feel about something because it is important that we are able to talk about these subjects...”*. Informal interactions can help social workers build trust and rapport with service users. By engaging in small talk or casual conversation in a relaxed environment social workers can create a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere which can help service users feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings, and concerns.

An important part of social work interactions is the power dynamics that exist between social workers and service users. This is justified by the disparity between the social worker's position of authority and expertise and the service users unique social and personal circumstances that lead to their need for services. This disparity may lead to power imbalances between social workers and service users. Foucault (1980) argues that power can operate through institutional structures. Social workers at Svenstrupgård operate within broader social structures that can influence power dynamics because they must operate under institutional policies and limited resources. Power relations between social workers and service users is multifaceted. Therefore, it is important for social workers and service users to be aware of power imbalances and continuously and actively address them. This is done at the workshop by involving service users in some working processes, sharing the same break room and workstations, dialogue etc.

Understanding power dynamics, being aware of power relations and working to address them can lead to more positive and equitable social work interactions and outcomes.

Based on my observations I can deduce that the social welfare system and perhaps social work education in Denmark has socially constructed social workers understanding of people experiencing substance use/abuse. Their non-judgmental attitude has been shaped by the social context of the welfare state (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Nordic countries have over the years adopted policies which have contributed to constructing the core values of the welfare state (Kuhnle & Sander 2010). Social workers view service users at the institution dealing with substance abuse as people who are sick and in need of help as explained by SW1 “...*most of them have had many years of addiction to alcohol or drugs, or both. So, physically they are deteriorated, they have to be helped, they need help with many things in their lives. So, we try to help them the best we can...*”.

Generally, even though some service users are guarded to share personal information, most service users I interacted with during my time at Svenstrupgård were open and forthcoming about their struggles, concerns, and goals. The way clients present themselves to social workers can vary greatly depending on the individual, situation, and environment. Some service users may present themselves openly, honestly and willing to work collaboratively with social workers to address their needs. Others may present themselves as being guarded, defensive, overwhelmed, resistant, helpless etc. It is important for social workers to remember that every service user is unique and their presentation to a social worker may vary depending on their individual experiences, personality, circumstances etc. and should tailor their approach of social work interactions to best meet the needs of the service user as an individual.

Understanding and navigating interpersonal dynamics of social work interactions is vital in building and maintaining healthy, collaborative, and constructive social work relationships with service users and achieving positive outcomes of social work interactions.

4.3 Collaborative social work interactions

In this section I examine the theme of collaborative social work interactions at Svenstrupgård derived from the results of this study with the aim of presenting how consensus and collaborative

problem solving is achieved during social work interactions. Collaborative social work interactions in this study are limited to collaborations between social workers and service users.

Excerpts from interviews

SW1. *“...I try to keep it(the meeting)on topic...when I visit you, at the end of the visit, we plan the next time I'll visit and what we'll talk about the next time, knowing very well that the next time I visit, it might be something completely different that we have to talk about, because maybe you found out your rent hasn't been paid, then we have to drop everything else and take care of that.”*

SW1. *“It's in the balance, because ideally, it's the citizen who says what is important to him that I have to help him with, because it's his life, and he has the right to live his life the way he wants to. But I also have to vurdere, what is it call? to evaluate if I think that it's the most important thing. So sometimes I say, no, it's not today, we talk about that. Today, it's rent or today it's the doctor's appointment. Next time, we can talk about the things you want to talk about.”*

SW 1. *“... But now that I visit people in their own home, it's their home, if they stay home their rules. If they say no, not today, I don't want to meet you I'm in a bad mood, that's okay, that's fine. I'll come back tomorrow, rather that, than go into a person's home, and start a conflict...”*

SW1. *“...we have regular courses in low arousal. It doesn't always work, but generally, you can talk people down, distract them, maybe negotiate new terms. Sometimes you just have to withdraw to your office and lock the door and call the police and let the police take people away from you. But most of the time, we can make an agreement.”*

SW1. *“...I try to put as much responsibility and as many of the tasks back on to the citizen as I can, but some of them just can't cope with very much. So, I have to do most of the work, that's just the way it is. But if I was helping you with something, I would like for you to learn a little bit, just a little bit from time to time about what you need to do to solve these problems yourself. So maybe I'll do 99% of the work but if you're 1%, better at solving your problems next week than you were last week, that's something and if I could just put 100% of the work on you, you*

wouldn't need me anyway. So, it's somewhere in between. If you just learn a little bit from time to time, that's okay.”

SW2. “...it happens often, that it can go two ways we can talk about it, and we can find somewhere in between. I can't give you this, but maybe I can help you achieve this. And either the citizen can accept this, or we can make a new arrangement...”

SU1. “I feel that they know a lot more than me about social work, but I also feel that I know my problems better and they respect how I want to do it and they are only trying to give me the tools to do it myself. So, they are not pushing anything through, you know, they are just trying to help me the best way so I can help myself.”

SU1: “I talk to them, and they listen to me and help me figure out what is the most important, yesterday I told (name redacted) what we need to do and what my problems are, and he helped me organise what I have to do. I can fix it myself, you know, I just have to get help to see what's important and what's not.”

SU2. “I feel like I can always say my opinion even when I disagree with the social worker. The thing is you have to say what you want, and they always try to help you. If they cannot they explain why, and we try to find other ways.”

SU2. “... I just want to find work now and my own house and they're helping me with that.”

Excerpts from field notes

Service users at Svenstrupgård are all expected to collaborate with social workers towards their goals. On the other hand, social workers are expected to interact with service users in a way that helps them uncover resources and challenges with the aim of finding a suitable home for them and motivating them towards activation. A few service users come to the institution and are willing to work collaboratively with social workers in addressing their needs from the onset. However, in addition to homelessness, most service users also struggle with mental health and substance abuse issues. As a result, they face unique challenges engaging in active collaboration with social workers as required by the institution. Some service users arrive at the institution guarded, defensive and resistant. Some may be unwilling to collaborate with social workers to

achieve the institution's predefined objectives of activation and finding a new home. Some do not want or are not ready for some of the responsibilities that come with maintaining a own home and would rather stay at the institution with people they can relate to. Some may be in denial about the severity of their problems and most of them are usually intoxicated which makes it difficult for social workers to engage with them and interact with them during the helping process.

There is also often stigma attached to substance abuse which can make it difficult for social workers to build trust with service users. Some service users may feel ashamed or embarrassed about their problems and may be hesitant to come out of their rooms and interact with social workers. It is also challenging for service users experiencing substance abuse or mental health issues such as depression and anxiety to be able to commit to a collaborative relationship with social workers. Service users' resistance, drug use, mental health issues, and some service users' dissatisfaction with services and/or social workers can result in threatening situations, conflicts, and violence at the institution.

Despite some of these challenges that may hinder collaboration, social workers continuously try to help and motivate service users towards their goals. Social workers use the strength-based approach during social work interactions, whereby focus is not so much on the service users' problems rather the focus is on their unique capabilities with the aim of motivating them to engage in positive change. Some service users eventually start to open up and become willing to collaborate. The process is unique for service users as individuals and some move back and forth during this collaborative process.

4.3.1 Reflections on collaborative social work interactions

Collaborative approaches with service users have been found to improve the quality of social work practice by promoting ethical considerations, such as the promotion of clients' self-determination and the use of evidence-based interventions (Gibbs, 2002). Collaboration also allows social workers to build trust and rapport with clients, which can enhance the therapeutic relationship and increase clients' engagement in the helping process.

According to Freire (1970), A collaborative approach promotes critical consciousness and transformational change by creating opportunities for service users to participate in the decision-making process. Collaborative approaches can help social workers to better understand the perspectives, experiences, and needs of service users and together they can plan interventions that are suitable and responsive.

In social work interactions, it is important to involve service users as collaborators in the helping process. Social workers cannot unilaterally eliminate people's problems simply because they have the knowledge and expertise or know what needs to be done (Cabiati & Panciroli, 2019). Social workers can only help solve, alleviate, or manage social problems through interpersonal relations and collaborating with service users experiencing these problems.

If the outcome of social interactions or interventions help service users solve, alleviate, or learn how to manage their problems, it is because service users were involved in helping themselves through guidance and other resources provided during the helping process. Therefore, according to Folgheraiter (2004, 2017) the relationship between service users and social workers must be reciprocal. Social workers and service users have different roles and competences, both have something to offer to the helping and collaborative process. This is evident in social work interactions at Svenstrupgård as stated by *SUI*. *“I feel that they know a lot more than me about social work, but I also feel that I know my problems better and they respect how I want to do it and they are only trying to give me the tools to do it myself...”* Social workers may provide objective meaning to the problem which may be derived from their knowledge of procedures, work experience, education etc. and service users may provide a subjective meaning to the problem which may be derived from experiencing the problem, their perspectives, narratives, feelings, goals, and knowledge gained through experiencing the problem (Sevenhuijsen, 2014).

This reciprocal aspect of collaboration also supports Foucault theory of power as being relational i.e., power is not possessed by individuals but is a dynamic relation between individuals and groups. Individuals are vehicles of power, not its point of application (Foucault, 1982, 1980).

As stated in the problem statement of this study, people with a variety of social problems may not easily conceptualize their problems or possible solutions without heavily depending on the social worker. They are also not ready for an energetic, problem solving, equitable collaborative

relationship with the social worker and may not be able to quickly stick to agreements or a plan (Coulshed and Orme, 2012).

Some service users come to Svenstrupgård and are willing to work collaboratively with social workers in addressing their needs from the onset. However, most service users also deal with mental health and substance abuse problems besides homelessness. This presents unique challenges for them to actively collaborate with social workers as required by the institution. Consensus and collaborative problem solving is therefore seen at Svenstrupgård as a unique process for service users. Service users participate and collaborate at different levels and all levels of participation are encouraged.

Social workers collaborate with service users, motivating them to take charge of their lives and be involved in the helping process as much possible. However, some service users' performance abilities have significantly declined because of many social issues they have encountered. As a result, they are unable to do much on their own without greatly relying on the social worker. Some service users are open and willing to collaborate because they feel that social workers have the knowledge and expertise to guide and help them achieve their goals. Social workers use different strategies to motivate service users to collaborate. For example, building trust, being patient and non-judgmental, involving service users as much as possible in the helping process, recognizing and praising service users' efforts to collaborate however small as stated by SW1. *"...So maybe I'll do 99% of the work but if you're 1%, better at solving your problems next week than you were last week, that's something and if I could just put 100% of the work on you, you wouldn't need me anyway..."*

As highlighted earlier in the problem statement of this study, the goal of task-centered practice is predetermined rather than dependent on the holistic overall recovery of service users. Furthermore, it can be very challenging for service users dealing with a variety of social issues to cope with the demands of a task centered approach (Coulshed and Orme, 2012). This aspect of predefined goals by the institution (finding a suitable home in a short time and activation) in some cases result to differences in goals and presents a challenge for consensus and collaborative problem solving. Some service users dealing with mental health and substance abuse problems would rather live at Svenstrupgård around people they can relate to, socialize with and to avoid dealing with what it takes to maintain their own home. Consensus and collaborative problem

solving is easily achieved when service users' goals are in sync with the predetermined goals of the institution. For example, SU2. is open and willing to collaborate towards his goals because his personal goals are consistent with the goals of the institution. *SU2. "... I just want to find work now and my own house and they're helping me with that."*

Consensus and collaborative problem solving is also achieved at Svenstrupgård through communication. Effective communication is a vital aspect of interpersonal dynamics and a vital professional skill in social work. Social workers build rapport and trust with service users through empathy and good communication skills, which can help enhance collaboration. At Svenstrupgård, this involves dialogue, negotiations, agreements, compromises, and motivational communication.

However, consensus and collaborative problem solving may not be reached because the service user is "not in the mood". Some service users can be resistant to collaborative problem solving. This resistance sometimes leads to threatening situations, conflicts and even violence. Social workers at the institution use low arousal approach while interacting with service users in these situations as explained by SW1 *"...we have regular courses in low arousal. It doesn't always work, but generally, you can talk people down, distract them, maybe negotiate new terms. Sometimes you just have to withdraw to your office and lock the door and call the police and let the police take people away from you. But most of the time, we can make an agreement."*

Low arousal is an evidence-based approach used to help deescalate and manage situations where an individual is exhibiting challenging or aggressive behaviors. This approach emphasizes the use of non-confrontational communication and active listening, as well as a calm and non-threatening demeanor. The goal of low arousal is to reduce the stress and anxiety that may be contributing to the individual's behavior, as well as to prevent further escalation. It involves using a soft and gentle tone of voice, maintaining a respectful distance, and avoiding physical contact unless necessary (McDonnell et al., 1998 & Low arousal, 2018).

Low arousal approach is an important tool which social workers at Svenstrupgård use to help manage difficult situations when interacting with service users with the goal of maintaining the safety and well-being of all parties involved and promoting collaboration.

Social constructivism emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in the development of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through their experiences and interactions with others. Social workers and service users at Svenstrupgård engage in dialogue and interaction to create meaning and understanding on the different issues affecting the lives of service users. This involves collaboration, negotiation, and debate, as they work together to make sense of their experiences and develop shared understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978).

Social workers recognize that clients have unique experiences and perspectives that shape their understanding of their own problems and needs. They also recognize that clients have strengths and resources that can be drawn upon to help them overcome their challenges. Social workers who adopt this social constructivist approach to collaboration with service users tend to be more collaborative, inclusive, and empowering. They actively listen to service users, seek to understand their experiences and perspectives, and engage them in a collaborative process of problem-solving. This approach acknowledges the importance of service user agency and encourages them to take an active role in shaping the direction of their own lives.

When service users collaborate with social workers during social work interactions at Svenstrupgård, the social worker guides the meeting because they are responsible for making sure that they go through the agenda for that meeting. There are often situations whereby, the service user is the one who requests a meeting and has topics they wish to discuss with the social worker. Social workers, however, may not always follow the agenda or plan of the meeting since they may discover that there are more pressing matters to attend to. The social worker has the authority to determine if the topic the service user wants to discuss is the most crucial on the list of issues to address.

Therefore, power relations can be identified during collaborations in social work interactions at Svenstrupgård. Based on the responses below by SW1., both social worker and service user have the power to say “no” during social work interactions.

SW1. “...ideally, it's the citizen who says what is important to him that I have to help him with, because it's his life, and he has the right to live his life the way he wants to. But I also have to vurdere, what is it call? to evaluate if I think that it's the most important thing. So sometimes I

say, no, it's not today, we talk about that. Today, it's rent or today's the doctor's appointment. Next time, we can talk about the things you want to talk about.”

SW1. “... But now that I visit people in their own home, it's their home, if they stay home their rules. If they say no, not today, I don't want to meet you I'm in a bad mood, that's okay, that's fine. I'll come back tomorrow, rather that, than go into a person's home, and start a conflict...”

When the social worker says “no” to a service user or vice versa, it can demonstrate power relations in different ways based on the context and circumstances. In the context of this example above by SW1., the social worker is drawing on his expertise to decide what he thinks is in the best interest of the service user. In this situation, the power dynamic is created because the social worker has specialized knowledge and experience that the service user might not have. On the other hand, when the service user says “no”, it asserts their self-determination, autonomy, and decision-making power. How the social worker responds to service users’ disagreement, or service users’ “no”, can either reinforce existing power dynamics or challenge them. For example, if the social worker reacts with anger or frustration, it can reinforce the power imbalance. If the social worker responds with respect, openness and understanding to the service user’s perspective, it can challenge the power imbalance and lead to a more collaborative relationship.

It is worth recognizing that power dynamics can also be involved when service users say “yes” or agrees with social workers. Some service users who are vulnerable, at risk or feel dependent on the social worker may agree with the social worker because they feel afraid to disagree.

Even though service users are required by the institution to collaborate, social workers do not make them collaborate. They recognize that the process and time frame is unique for service users. Social workers make use of the strength-based approach which assumes that service users all have strengths and positive resources (Giacomucci, 2021). They focus on service users’ strengths to motivate them towards collaboration, activation, and self-efficacy despite some of the hurdles.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted based on my curiosity to explore social work interactions at the welfare home Svenstrupgård. As a micro level practitioner, I am interested in topics of social work interactions, how social workers and service users present themselves to each other and how consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved during social work interactions. I have presented my reflections on the results of this study in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I present some discussions, summarize the study's outcomes based on the results analyzed in the previous chapter and present my recommendations for further studies. This chapter also concludes this study.

Social work interactions take place in the context of the processes being experienced by the people, or agencies involved in the process. Therefore, the context in which social work takes place affect how we interact (Payne, 2009). Communication just like all human interaction is context oriented. Social work interactions are greatly influenced by the context (social systems) in which people live (Koprowska, 2020). Svenstrupgård is a social system in which social work interactions take place and this study sheds light on communication in this context.

Creswell (2013) similarly mentions that we cannot separate what people say from where they say it. The context or setting of social work interactions affects the topics discussed, interpersonal dynamics and how consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved. Prior to my field study at Svenstrupgård, my practice experience had been in a formal office setting where service users visit on appointment during business hours. Service users live and work at Svenstrupgård and can interact with social workers every day in an informal setting. The findings of this study highlight the importance of informal social work interactions on interpersonal dynamics and collaboration. Informal interactions as previously mentioned help build rapport, trust, and lessen power disparities between social workers and service users. Social workers' patience may also be improved by the fact that they are able to interact with service users every day. For example, if a service user is "not in the mood" to collaborate at a particular time, it is easier for social workers to try again later in the day or the next day. Whereas the next available appointment slot in a formal social office might not be for several days or weeks.

One of the most important things we learn from this study as regards communication in this context is the importance of effective and motivational communication in social work interactions. This study highlights some motivational communication strategies and techniques used by social workers at Svenstrupgård when interacting with service users who also deal with mental health and substance abuse issues. These include: 1. *Non-judgmental attitude*. Social workers at Svenstrupgård approach substance abuse with a non-judgmental attitude. They avoid moralistic or confrontational language. 2. *Motivational interactions*. Social workers use this service user centered approach with the goal of motivating service users to explore their ambivalence and motivations for change. They patiently motivate them towards change by guiding service users to explore the discrepancies between their current behavior and their goals. 3. *Strength-based approach*. Social workers focus on service users' strengths which can motivate them towards self-efficacy rather than their problems. Social workers try to identify service users' coping mechanisms, skills, and positive qualities to enhance their motivation. 4. *Social workers demonstrate empathy and understanding*. They communicate their understanding of service users' struggles and engage with them during interactions, understanding their perspectives and not dismissing them as being under the influence of drugs. 5. *Patience*. Even though the institution expects service users to collaborate with social workers towards their goals, social workers are extremely patient with service users. Instead of pressuring or forcing service users to collaborate, they continuously and patiently work to motivate and negotiate with service users towards collaboration. 6. *Strategies in establishing rapport*. For example, sharing the same break room, chatting, laughing, eating together in an informal setting, being warm, approachable, and respectful to service users.

This knowledge gained can inform training programs for new employees and social workers working with this group or other groups of service users in other institutions. It can also inform interventions and contribute to enhancing the quality of social work practice at the micro level.

Another important outcome of this study is that it helps identify the barriers and challenges faced by social workers during social work interactions and prompts participants and readers of this study to reflect on these issues. These include issues such as power dynamics as discussed in the previous chapter, differences in goals, resistance, aggressive behaviors, and most service users not showing up for the activation program. The first step of addressing a problem is identifying and

acknowledging that there is an issue. Identifying these challenges and reflecting on them can lead to the development of strategies and interventions to address them effectively.

This study also helps identify social work approaches used at Svenstrupgård that have positive social work outcomes. For example, *the low arousal method* used at Svenstrupgård when interacting with service users exhibiting aggressive behaviors. Social workers with other groups of service users can also benefit from the low arousal approach (see, McDonnell et al., 1998 & Low arousal, 2018). *The harm reduction approach* is another working method used at the institution. This approach recognizes that quitting drug use may not be realistic or achievable for some substance abusers and emphasizes engaging with service users to lessen the harm related to drug use such as overdose, transmission of infectious diseases etc. (Kappel et al., 2016). *The activation program* provided by the institution at the workshops aimed at providing structure in the lives of service users and motivating them towards activation is also another working approach that can have positive outcomes. Hence this study can contribute to informing social work interventions and approaches, thereby helping to improve the effectiveness of social work interactions and social work outcomes. *The strength-based approach* to social work interactions at Svenstrupgård can also help service users realize their abilities to engage in positive change.

This study provides an insight into the experiences, perspectives and needs of homeless service users dealing with mental health and substance abuse problems. What stands out in this study is that service users experiencing these problems are not a homogenous group and their needs, strengths, challenges, and preferences vary. By understanding their individual needs and experiences, social workers can tailor their interventions and ways in which they interact with service users based on their unique needs.

For social work interactions to occur, there must be a reason or goal for these interactions. This study helps identify main topics of discussion during social work interactions. Interpersonal dynamics can be significantly impacted by the topics of social work interactions. For example, we learn from this study that topics of social work interactions can play a vital role in establishing rapport with service users, e.g., topics that are in line with service users' personal goals. Other topics can reinforce power imbalances e.g., house rules. While some topics can evoke strong emotions e.g., topics on substance abuse or other personal struggles. Social workers can contribute to a positive interpersonal dynamic, strengthen the working relationship, facilitate collaborative

problem solving, and foster positive social work outcomes by approaching these topics with sensitivity, empathy, validation, and involvement of service users' strengths and preferences.

Whether discussing topics of social work interactions, interpersonal dynamics, or collaborative social work interactions, communication is the common thread running through all these themes. Communication is the medium through which relations and collaborations are formed in social work practice. Communication in social work also includes listening. Payne (2009) explains that during the process of social work interactions social workers “*must bring together both the actions of various people involved, factors that affect these actions, movement towards achieving something and the outcome we want to achieve*” (Payne, 2009 p.168).

Social work interactions are purposeful, goal oriented and intentional. Therefore, social work requires a variety of communication skills which social workers acquire through social work education and experience. These skills involve the social workers expertise in using theoretical frameworks purposefully and intentionally during interactions with the aim of achieving specific goals. Koprowska (2020) mentions that communication skills make a difference in social work interactions in how service users feel about services and their social workers.

Based on my African roots and my social work experience where the family plays a vital role in supporting the well-being of family members and helping them in times of need, I was surprised that family ties was not one of the topics of discussions at Svenstrupgård and the family system wasn't one of the resources used in planning and executing social work interventions. The empirical material for this study does not give any ideas on how to involve service users' families in social work interventions in this context. I learned during this research process that this is because most service users at Svenstrupgård have broken ties with their family members. The reasons for this vary depending on individual circumstances. Some of the reasons cited were that substance abusers may lie, steal, manipulate, break promises etc. to sustain their addictions, causing family members to avoid them. Family members may have had to separate themselves and their children from certain substance abusers because their behavior became violent or threatening.

However, I think the family system can be a valuable resource in social work with service users experiencing homelessness and substance abuse. An assessment of family dynamics can help social workers gain understanding of service users experiences and how substance abuse or mental health has impacted the family system. Social workers can provide education about substance

abuse, its effects and available treatment options which can help family members understand the complexities of addiction, reduce blame or stigma, and encourage their involvement in supporting family members dealing with these issues. Social workers can facilitate open and honest communication among family members, helping them express their needs, feelings and concerns in a constructive manner which can help strengthen family bonds and promote understanding. Family members might serve as role models for service users. Service users might want the same for themselves by witnessing family members participating in the community and leading drug-free lives in their own homes. I think involving the family system can contribute to improved social work outcomes, increase support for service users and a more holistic approach to enhancing their well-being. Therefore, I suggest that further research should explore the possibilities of involving the family system in social work interactions with this group of service users.

I also recommend that further research on social work interactions make use of practice research methodology and collaborate closely with service users and social workers throughout the research process. This can be empowering for service users and their needs can be better considered when service users themselves play an active role in research that may contribute to informing working methods, interventions, and policy. Different approaches of practice research could be used, for example, the research could be carried out by social workers (practitioner research approach), researchers, service users and social workers could carry out the research as partners and collaborate as stakeholders (participatory practice research) or the research can be carried out by service users themselves (service user focused practice research approach) (See Andersen et al. 2020 & Uggerhøj 2011, 2014,).

As mentioned earlier in chapter 2.6.2, service users with severe substance abuse and mental health issues were excluded from this study through purposive sampling. Therefore, I recommend that further research should find innovative ways to include service users with severe substance abuse and mental health issues and provide opportunities for their voices, experiences, perspectives, and narratives to be heard in research.

To conclude, service users at Svenstrupgård deal with a variety of social problems for example homelessness, mental health issues, substance abuse issues etc. which can present challenges to constructive, collaborative social work interactions and affect the dynamics of these interactions. We learn from this study that despite these challenges, social work interactions at the micro level

are crucial in promoting well-being and facilitating positive changes in the lives of service users. Therefore, social workers must interact with service users in ways that meet the ethical principles of social work, enhance well-being, and help meet the basic human needs of service users. Social workers must continuously come up with innovative methods and adopt evidence-based methods to interact with service users in ways that motivates them, support the collaborative process, enhance human well-being, and promote positive social work outcomes.

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APPENDIX

Interview guide

Interview with social workers

Venue: Svenstrupgård

Date: 25.01.2023

Time: 9:00 am

Participants: Two social workers

Research Topic: Social work interactions between homeless service users and social workers: A case study of the welfare home Svenstrupgård

Research questions

- What are the main topics of discussion during interactions?
- How do service users and service providers present themselves to each other?
- How consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved during interactions?

Interview Guidelines: Discussions about the nature and aims of research, issues of confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, and consent with participants before proceeding with interview.

Data extraction motivated by three main themes: Power relations, conflicts/disagreements, aspect of time.

General questions

- i. What is your professional title?
- ii. How long have you been a social worker?
- iii. How long have you worked at Svenstrupgård?
- iv. Have you liked working here so far?

Questions under themes

Power relations

- i. Who initiates topics for discussions during your meetings with service users?
- ii. What happens when service users bring up topics that are outside the agenda of meeting?

Conflicts/ Disagreements/Resistance

- i. Do you have situations where service users disagree with you? How are these disagreements dealt with?
- ii. What happens when a service user is insisting on their goals/wants/needs and you as a social worker are not able to help them meet these goals?
- iii. Have you had situation where a service user does not want to collaborate with you? What happens in a situation like this?

Time

- i. Do you feel that you have enough time with your service users, or do you feel you are too busy and would like to give them more time to discuss the issues they want to discuss?

Interview with service users

Venue: Svenstrupgård

Date: 24.01.2023

Time: 9:00 am

Participants: Two service users

Research Topic: Social work interactions between homeless service users and social workers: A case study of the welfare home Svenstrupgård

Research questions

- What are the main topics of discussion during interactions?
- How do service users and service providers present themselves to each other?
- How consensus and collaborative problem solving is achieved during interactions?

Interview Guidelines

Discussions about the nature and aims of research, issues of confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, and consent with participants before proceeding with interview.

Data extraction from service users motivated by three main themes: Power relations, conflicts, aspect of time.

General questions

- v. Where are you from?
- vi. How long have you lived at Svenstrupgård?
- vii. How do you feel about living here?
- viii. How did you become homeless?

Questions under themes

Power relations

- iii. Who initiates topics for discussions during your meetings with the social worker?
- iv. What happens when you bring up topics that are not on the meeting's agenda?

Conflicts/ Disagreements/Resistance

- iv. Do you have situations where you disagree with the social worker? How are these disagreements dealt with?
- v. What happens when you are insisting on your goals/wants/needs and the social worker is not able to help you meet these goals?
- vi. Have you had situation where you do not want to collaborate with your social worker? What happens in a situation like this?

Time

- ii. Do you feel that social workers have enough time to interact with you and discuss the issues you want to discuss?