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Case Study on the organization MiM Kunskapscentrum

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Introduction

The non-profit organization MiM Kunskapscentrum (MiM) is based in Gothenburg and deals with issues of integration (MiM, n.d.a), a highly relevant topic in Sweden at the moment. In his speech before the parliament on the 12th of September 2023, Sweden's current Prime Minister announced that there will be a significant paradigm shift in the country's immigration policy. According to him, Sweden is facing the severe consequences of "high levels of immigration, in combination with failed integration" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). He elaborates that this manifests itself in an escalation of violent acts and demands stricter regulations on immigrants, such as expelling people who have committed criminal offenses and tightening the requirements on language learning and adhering to Swedish societal norms and values for those who want to stay (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023).

MiM takes on a different approach. As their website states, they work from an intercultural perspective and want people from different backgrounds "to be seen as an important asset in schools, the labor market, and society" (MiM, n.d.a). A member of staff explained that the organization encourages mutual learning from each other and sees integration as a two-way street between people migrating to Sweden and the locals (Person A, 2023). To support the integration process, MiM offers a wide variety of services that are mainly aimed at young immigrants. They carry out individual sessions with their service users, centered around whatever concerns them at the moment. This can range from looking for employment to dealing with authorities and other social problems (MiM, n.d.b). Another offer is that MiM holds regular group sessions with different societal and political topics. Furthermore, the organization is active in supporting young people to organize themselves and helps them realize their own ideas, for example starting up a company. In terms of services that are not directly focused on the target group, MiM also holds lectures and workshops on topics like integration and does a lot of networking, spreading information about their target group and their needs (MiM, n.d.b).

Purpose of the case study

This case study aims to analyze MiM as a human service organization, looking at how it functions and examining its social work practice. As a research question, the analysis will focus on how service user participation is realized within MiM's organizational structure and daily activities. Therefore, the paper will first introduce the central theoretical concepts of participation and empowerment as well as the research methods used, before continuing with the main examination. This will involve reviewing MiM's construction of their service users and the organization's structure. When it comes to social work practice, the paper will touch on MiM's main work method and explicitly discuss their interpretation of empowerment. The case study ends with a summary and concluding remarks on the organization.

Theoretical starting points and methods

The following section will explain the key aspects of participation and empowerment as theoretical starting points of the case study and clarify how they are interpreted in this frame of work. The two concepts were chosen because of their compatibility with the case study's purpose of exploring service user involvement. Furthermore, the chosen method of data collection will be described and put into the context of research ethics.

The theoretical concept of participation

Conceptualizing participation as a theoretical approach holds some complexities, as there have been many different understandings of it over time. What participation is really supposed to look like in practice is contested up until today. As Beresford (2021, p. 63) puts it, “[p]articipation is an idea and term that has its own lengthy history, its own ideological relations and it lays many traps for those who don’t treat it with care”. According to him, one of the dominant ideologies that can be observed in recent discussion is a democratic approach to participation. The emphasis here lies on people being able to influence their own and societal circumstances according to personal preferences (Beresford, 2021, p. 65). Put into the context of human service organizations, “[t]he democratic approaches of service users [...] are clearly concerned with participation that increases people’s say and redistributes power to them so that they are able to achieve change through their involvement” (Beresford, 2021, p. 65). This corresponds to the interpretation of participation within this case study.

To go a bit deeper into a service user-oriented understanding of participation, this paper will also refer to the emerging idea of co-production. Beresford (2021, p. 69) defines this as an advanced concept aiming for a partnership between professionals and service users where neither party is dominated by the other. Service users should not only be given more involvement but more control in decision-making processes and their personal expertise should be acknowledged and valued. The grounding principles of co-production are “power-sharing, equality, collaborative working, networking and capacity building” (Burns et al., 2023, p. 3). As Beresford (2021, p. 70) points out, critics of co-production see the approach’s goals as idealistic and often unattainable in practice. If this is the case will be explored when analyzing the organization later on in the case study.

The theoretical concept of empowerment

Similar to the concept of participation, “[i]t is difficult to give a short and unambiguous definition of empowerment” (Askheim, 2003, p. 230). Searching for shared elements across different empowerment theories, Askheim (2003, p. 230) concludes that there is a common thread of describing it as a power transmission in favor of people who have been lacking influence over their own life situation. In professional social work settings, the power to take action and make

an impact on their structural environment should be transferred back to those people. This can for example be facilitated by providing them with resources, educational opportunities, and guiding them in self-awareness (Askheim, 2003, p. 230). Throughout this process, it is assumed that the people affected have the best knowledge about their own struggles and have the strengths and abilities to overcome them. It is the professional's job to understand the service users' experiences and to support them in building on their strong suits, while also mobilizing additional resources that can work in their favor (Turner and Maschi, 2005, p. 159).

At this point it also must be noted that as Tew (2006, p. 34) mentions, there is a "tendency for empowerment to be defined for relatively powerless people by those with vested political or professional interests". Therefore, the concept of empowerment can also be misused by professionals in the sense that they 'do empowerment' for their service users and define what their problems and needs are and what goals they should work toward, instead of listening to the people's own experiences and ideas. Such practices no longer promote service users taking their power back but rather perpetuate unequal dynamics that hinder their involvement (Tew, 2006, p. 34). This case study will examine the way MiM understands and practices empowerment and compare it to the concept's core ideas.

Methods

To investigate how MiM implements service user participation, the two methods of online research and personal communication with staff members were used to collect the data for this case study. Firstly, information was gathered from the organization's online appearance, starting with their official website ([MiM Knowledge Centre \(mimkunskapscentrum.se\)](http://mimkunskapscentrum.se)). It gives an overview of MiM's various activities and projects and briefly introduces the organization and its historical background. The website also provides information about who works at MiM and gives some visual insights through a photo gallery. As a staff member of MiM informed me, their website is actually their least used form of online presence and they are more active through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram since those are frequently used by their target group as well (Person A, 2023). Therefore, looking at the organization's social media accounts where they give regular updates on upcoming events and what is happening around MiM was included in the research process.

For the second method, personal communication with staff members of MiM was used to complement the picture that the organization gives online and gain a deeper understanding of how MiM functions in practice. Initial contact was made through a visit to the organization's office in Göteborg, where I met a member of staff and had a brief face-to-face conversation about the organization's operations. A second meeting was arranged to answer further questions and took place with two staff members over Zoom. Through directly engaging with professionals working at MiM and getting two different perspectives on the topics raised, I was

able to profit from their extensive knowledge and comprehend more about the organization's inner workings. I was also offered the possibility of speaking to a member of MiM's target group, however, this was not achievable due to personal data processing concerns on my side. Therefore, this case study is restricted to the staff member's view of the organization and how they want MiM to be perceived. This is to be seen critically, especially in the context of exploring the topic of service user participation but could not be facilitated otherwise due to the limited scope of this case study.

To make sure that the methods used comply with the research ethics of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet), I informed the staff members of MiM about the purpose of this case study and got their consent for participating, fulfilling the information and the consent requirement (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, pp. 7-10). To meet the confidentiality requirement (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, p. 12) I have anonymized the staff members that I talked to as much as possible, referring to them as Person A and Person B. There will not be any personal identifiers throughout the case study to ensure that information cannot be traced back to the individuals. As for the usage requirement (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, p. 14), the information I collected through personal communication with the two staff members will be used for this case study only and no data was stored.

The case study will combine the information gathered from the organization's online appearance and staff communication with literature on the topics of human service organizations, participation, and empowerment. I chose the method of chain research and used the search engine Supersök of the University of Gothenburg library to find fitting articles that can put the research data into a theoretical perspective.

Analysis

The main analysis of this case study will focus on MiM's service users and organizational structure before examining their social work practice in terms of the main work method and the approach to the empowerment concept.

Service users

Before examining how MiM realizes service user participation in their organizational structure and daily activities, it needs to be described who their services are aimed at and how the staff defines the organization's target group. As Hasenfeld (2010, p. 11) states, all kinds of organizations work with some sort of raw material that they can transform into their products. "Human service organizations are distinguished by the fundamental fact that people are their 'raw material'" (Hasenfeld 2010, p. 11). In the case of MiM, their website reads that the organization's services are "primarily aimed at third-country nationals aged 16–30" (MiM,

n.d.a). Person A (2023) clarified on Zoom that while the organization mainly focuses on immigrants as service users, their target group is quite diverse in practice and includes people in many different kinds of circumstances. They for example work with young people who migrated to Sweden in 2015 or earlier, youngsters who were born in Sweden and have parents who immigrated to the country, asylum seekers, and people that live in Sweden undocumented. Therefore, the organization's target group represents a broad range of people whose life situations are affected by the topic of migration (Person A, 2023). To reach an even wider audience and to avoid the exclusion of potential service users, this information could be added to MiM's website.

Even though MiM's target group encompasses people in varied circumstances, one shared commonality is that they are not fully established in Swedish society yet and are unable to actively participate in it to the same extent as Swedish people can. Beresford (2021, p. 74) describes such exclusion by noting that "[w]hatever kind or level of participation we are talking about, there is still the issue of who is likely to be able to be involved and the need to recognise that this isn't likely routinely to be equal and universal". The state of isolation that MiM's target group experiences can express itself in different ways, but it's mainly about not understanding how to use the resources that the Swedish system has to offer. As Person A (2023) explains, Sweden has a very complicated bureaucratic system which makes it difficult for MiM's target group to access the services that they need and could benefit from. That is where the organization comes in, supporting its service users in establishing contact with the right entities responsible for their concerns and explaining to them what must be done so that their needs can be covered. The goal is to utilize an empowerment approach and enable them to find their own way around the system. To get them started, the staff members can make calls to different authorities utilizing their extensive network contacts, for example within the migration office or housing authorities. They also support the service users in completing the bureaucratic processes that might ensue and stay by their side until all of their initial worries are taken care of, all while fostering the service users' independence (Person A, 2023).

Hasenfeld (2010, p. 11) sees this as the organization's transformation process of their raw material into the final products. According to him, the service users are confronted with different forms of control during this process, restricting them in what personal traits and what kind of behavior the organization expects and asks from them (Hasenfeld, 2010, pp. 11-12). However, as staff member Person A (2023) described over Zoom, this is not how MiM approaches the working relationship with its service users. The aim is always to get to know them as people first and create a relaxed atmosphere to talk. The next step is to assess their needs by asking them about their current life situation and wishes. After listening, the professionals make some suggestions as well and a plan on how to meet the identified needs is made. The service users

are actively participating in this planning activity, being asked about their opinions and views. When the plan is done, the workload it takes to put it into practice is divided between the staff member and the service user. Therefore, it is a shared effort and there is not supposed to be any controlling dynamic (Person A, 2023). By not defining the service users' problems for them but listening to how they perceive their own struggles, the staff members at MiM avoid the common "teacher/student trap" (Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005, p. 439) in social work interventions that devalues the service users' insights while putting the professionals in an all-knowing teacher position. Such acknowledgement of the service users' experiences and narratives is an important aspect when implementing empowerment in social work practice (Askheim, 2003, p. 230). Still, as Sakamoto and Pitner (2005, p. 438) emphasize, it must be taken into account that a certain power imbalance between professionals and service users will always be there and should not be ignored but critically reflected upon. Beresford (2021, p. 89) confirms this by saying that "[p]articipation at its most meaningful is about recognising the significance of power and challenging such inequalities of power".

When closing his analogy on human service organizations, Hasenfeld (2010, p. 12) retracts that people are not like any other raw material after all in the sense that they do react to the interventions being performed on them and therefore influence the course of the transformation process. This is especially the case for MiM's operations since their service users are highly involved in the support they receive. Going even further, Hasenfeld (2010, p. 12) states that "[i]n a broader sense, clients through their self-presentations and their responses to workers also affect how the workers structure their daily routines". More on how service users impact the organizational structure in the case of MiM will be explored next in this case study.

Organizational structure

When exploring how MiM practices service user involvement, it is essential to look at their organizational structure since target group members are represented on all operational levels. As can be seen on the website, the organization consists of four employees and has a board of directors which currently holds eight members. It is stated that the target group holds positions within the board and representatives are active in each project and all of the activities that MiM operates (MiM, n.d.a). During the Zoom conversation, Person B (2023) elaborated that the current president of the board is a former service user, as well as another board member. This is also the case for the person working for MiM as a job coach. As Beresford (2021, p. 99) points out, there is a lot of value in having people that experienced the social problems the organization is working with firsthand involved in this way. He emphasizes the effectiveness of self-organizations that are "run by the people they are for, rather than set up by others for them" (Beresford, 2021, p. 99). MiM cannot be classified as a self-organization since its target group does not make up the majority of the staff or the board. However, through

the representation of former service users on the board and within the staff, it can be assumed that MiM comes close to self-organizations in terms of understanding the service users' real needs.

Another possibility for the target group to participate in MiM's organizational structure is as volunteers. As Person A (2023) describes, service users are active as ambassadors of the organization, spreading the word about what kind of help MiM provides in their usual environments. Since they are among their peers, target group members themselves have the best chance of being able to reach out to more potential service users who could benefit from what MiM has to offer. This can be related to the power of shared experience, which Beresford (2021, p. 100) sees as key element to successful organizing and bringing people together. Furthermore, service users are also very involved in the organization's social group activities where they ensure positive social dynamics between the participants by walking amongst them and being very observant. It is their goal to make everyone feel comfortable and to guarantee that the participants get something out of the activity. They also act as translators, both of cultural differences and different languages. MiM does not have any translation experts among the staff, they use the knowledge of their service users to bridge language barriers (Person A, 2023). Throughout the explanations of MiM's staff members, it became clear that in this case, the service users want to help the organization out in the mentioned ways and see it as a positive opportunity to pass on what they have gained through their own journey at MiM. However, volunteerism is an ambiguous concept and while it can increase a person's self-confidence and network, it can also be problematized as unpaid labor and lead to the "undervaluing of skills [and] disempowerment" (Bontenbal et al., 2023, p. 2). It is therefore important to make sure that volunteering keeps being a positive experience for the service users and does not start to have any of the mentioned negative effects.

The examination of MiM's structure has shown that service users have the opportunity to participate in the organization as volunteers and there are also possibilities to become a staff or board member. On the "ladder of service user participation" proposed by Kam (2021, p. 1434), electing people out of the target group to become board members and involving service users in the design and implementation of offered programs reaches the ultimate participation level of decision-making and control. However, Beresford (2021, p. 64) suggests that participation does not always progress linearly, and just because some aspects of service user involvement are fulfilled, others might not be. Therefore, this case study will continue with a deeper analysis of how MiM's service users can take part in the organization's decision making and creation of services by analyzing the main work method.

Work method

MiM's work method is rather rare and specific, making it an interesting topic for the analysis of the organization's social work practice. As stated on the organization's website, "MiM works with relational welfare as a platform and relational capacity as a working method" (MiM, n.d.a). According to Person B (2023), MiM is the only non-profit organization in Gothenburg utilizing this approach. Relational welfare is compatible with MiM's participatory and empowering ideology since it puts emphasis on the importance of human relationships and working toward the common goal of social justice and equal welfare access together. "Humans are relational beings and always depend on each other to survive and thrive in communal forms of organising human collectives" (Von Heimburg and Ness, 2021, p. 645). In the relational welfare approach, the basis of human connection is used to co-create goods of public value, for example welfare services, in a collaborative effort between the public sector and all of its citizens. Democratic participation is therefore at the heart of this approach, aiming to involve the people in governmental decision-making processes and giving them the power to have some influence over the social system they live in (Von Heimburg and Ness, 2021, pp. 642-645).

This being the platform that MiM is working with, the emphasis on human relationships and the co-creation of services together with the target group is reflected in their organizational operations. As Person A (2023) explained, their method of relational capacity is founded on establishing trust between the staff and the service users to enable an efficient mode of working together. The goal is to always build some sort of relationship with every person that gets into contact with the organization before any intervention starts. As an example, Person A (2023) mentioned the first meeting with a new service user not being held in the organization's formal office room but inviting them for coffee and something to eat, talking about private matters for ten minutes to an hour to create a comfortable connection. By doing simple, little things like that, a bond between the professional and the service user is initiated and the work on the target member's social problems can begin. This is in line with the relational welfare philosophy that "[t]ransformative change is bound by human relationships, and these relationships are the core of the fluid and dynamic process of socially just participation and public value creation" (Von Heimburg and Ness, 2021, p. 645). The significance of trusting relationships is also supported by data that Burns et al. (2023, p. 6) collected in their study report exploring "Coproduction with Service Users in Adult Social Work". As the results of interviews with service users show, open and honest relationships with professionals on eye level are essential for a functioning co-production approach in social work.

Exploring how MiM puts the co-creational aspect of relational welfare into practice, I found out that the organization launches its projects and activities in collaboration with its service users. According to Person A (2023), the client's opinions are highly valued within the MiM system,

and the organization reacts to what kind of feedback they receive from the target group. For example, people can come forward with suggestions for new activities or projects at any time and that is how MiM identifies their client's needs and therefore their next course of action. Additionally, the staff comes up with new topics as well, which they think would be relevant and helpful to the people that the organization reaches. Those topics are then presented to the target group and put into practice, depending on their reaction which as the staff member describes are mostly positive (Person A, 2023). This way of coming up with new services on the terms of the target group corresponds to Beresford's (2021, p. 69) principles of co-production, specifically the service users being involved in decision-making processes and agenda-setting as equal partners from early on. This elevates service users from not only being able to participate in the organization but also controlling the direction it takes in the future (Beresford, 2021, p. 69). As Person A (2023) described, the importance of the target group's opinions also extends beyond discussions about new services and applies to all decisions that the organization makes. Seeing that "different degrees of participation and non-participation depend on how much decision-making power the users have" (Gathen et al., 2022, p. 53), this speaks for MiM's effective service user involvement.

The analysis of MiM's work method suggests that it is heavily based on fostering service user participation by entering into a co-productional, equalizing partnership with them. As Von Heimburg and Ness (2021, p. 642) stipulate, such co-production approaches cause a change in the role of citizens, or in this case service users. They evolve from being passive, disempowered service receivers to becoming "active, empowered contributors in the process of (co-)creating public value" (Von Heimburg and Ness, 2021, p. 642). More on how MiM approaches the empowerment of its service users within their offered support will be explored next in this case study.

Empowerment

Empowerment is a concept that takes on a central role in how MiM staff interacts with their service users and therefore plays an important role in this case study's analysis of the organization's social work practice. According to Person A (2023), empowerment lies at the heart of MiM's operations. When individuals turn to the organization for help, whether it be about seeking employment, asylum questions, or other concerns, MiM's employees intend to provide them with the support they need to eventually support themselves (Person A, 2023). This fits Askheim's (2003, p. 230) definition of empowerment as increasing the service user's power to take action over their own lives and giving them the tools they need to do so.

In line with this, Person A (2023) explains empowerment as showing the service users that they own their own situations and giving them full control over everything that is done for them and with them during the performed interventions. The service users are the ones ultimately

determining what steps they want to or do not want to take, for example when they are in the process of looking for employment and making decisions about job opportunities. As Askheim (2003, p. 230) points out, giving the target group complete control over the provided support like this may carry the risk of reducing the intervention's quality. Professionals need to carefully "balance between the responsibility they have for assisting the people they are employed to help and the respect for these people's right to self-determination" (Askheim 2003, p. 236). This alludes to the fact that the decisions service users make for themselves might not always contribute to maximizing their well-being in the long run. However, this needs to be especially taken into consideration when working with target groups that face difficulties in articulating their best interest, for example differently-abled people (Askheim, 2003, p. 236). This is not the case for the service users MiM works with and Person A (2023) describes that the people turning to the organization for help are provided with support that enables them to learn more about how they can support themselves and go about covering their needs. Therefore, while they do hold control over decisions made about their lives, they are not left to their own devices when it comes to creating good living conditions for themselves. The ultimate goal is to give them the right tools to become active citizens and find their place in society (Person A, 2023).

As Person B (2023) added, taking on a strengths perspective by believing in the service user's abilities to manage their own situations and navigate their everyday life is also an important aspect of how MiM puts empowerment into practice. Empowerment then describes "the trajectory of people who manage to rise out of positions of helplessness and confusion to (re)claim control over their lives and discover their own 'inner strengths'" (Tew, 2006, p. 34). The professionals thus hold a positive view of the service users already having what it takes to improve their circumstances and support them in their empowerment process by building on these strengths and providing further resources (Askheim, 2003, p. 230). Person B (2023) elaborated that for MiM's staff, this can for example mean giving the service users access to a network consisting of other target group members or enabling them to profit from the organization's network connections within the municipality. The general aim is to convey the sentiment that MiM's staff is on their service users' side and to strengthen their belief in themselves (Person B, 2023).

Tying together the different themes discussed in this case study, Kam (2021, p. 1432) proposes that "participation is the best means to advance the use of the strengths perspective and to help service users to achieve empowerment". Both Kam (2021, p. 1433) and Beresford (2021, p. 72) believe that true participation in which the involvement of service users is more than just symbolic and actually enables them to make their own informed choices leads to a successful empowerment process. As the analysis of their social work practice has shown, this view is also represented by MiM's approach to the empowerment concept.

Conclusion

To answer the research question of this case study, the analysis of MiM's structure and social work practice has shown that service user participation is realized by integrating empowerment and involvement strategies all throughout the organization's operations. Members of the target group make up a big part of the organizational structure in being represented as board members, staff, and volunteers, and are highly involved throughout individual interventions. The working platform of relational welfare and the method of relational capacity reflect MiM's aim to build empowering and egalitarian relationships with their service users and to enable them to control the future direction of the organization. According to the staff, they have a say in all of MiM's decisions and their possibilities of impacting how the organization evolves do not seem superficial but like actual opportunities for participation. Therefore, I see MiM as a good practice example of a human service organization that enables its target group to co-create the services that are being offered to them and by doing so is very close to their realities and needs.

For further research, it would be interesting to fill in the gap of a service user's perspective on MiM's participatory approach. It was not possible to communicate with a member of the target group within the frame of this case study, however, it would be enriching to learn about how they experience MiM's services and especially how they feel about the different possibilities for service user involvement. Furthermore, this paper mainly focuses on the individual support MiM provides, and the framework of the case study was unable to explore all the organization's services. This leaves room for further investigations of the organization.

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