

# Making sense of cost-consciousness in social work

Per Nikolaj Bukh

*Aalborg University Business School, Aalborg University, Aalborg Øst, Denmark*

Karina Skovvang Christensen

*Department of Economics and Business Economics, Aarhus University,  
Aarhus, Denmark, and*

Anne Kirstine Svanholt

*Aalborg University Business School, Aalborg University, Aalborg Øst, Denmark*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore how the introduction of new accounting information influences the understandings of cost-consciousness. Furthermore, the paper explores how managers use accounting information to shape organizational members' understanding of changes, and how focusing on cost-consciousness influence professional culture within social services.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on a case study, drawing on sensemaking as a theoretical lens. Top management, middle management and staff specialists at a medium-sized Danish municipality are interviewed.

**Findings** – The paper demonstrates how accounting metaphors can be effective in linking cost information and cost-consciousness to operational decisions in daily work practices. Further, the study elucidates how professionalism may be strengthened based on the use of accounting information.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study is context specific, and the role of accounting in professional work varies on the basis of the specific techniques involved.

**Practical implications** – The paper shows how managers influence how professionals interpret and use accounting information. It shows how cost-consciousness can be integrated with social work practices to improve service quality.

**Originality/value** – The paper contributes to the literature on how accounting information influences social work. To date, only a few papers have focused on how cost-consciousness can be understood in practice and how it influences professional culture. Further, the study expands the limited accounting metaphor research.

**Keywords** Budgeting, Sensemaking, Management accounting, Metaphors, Public sector, Social services, Cost-consciousness

**Paper type** Research paper

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, austerity politics (Bracci *et al.*, 2015) has increased pressure on local government organizations (Van der Kolk *et al.*, 2015) and cost-conscious driven by changes in management control systems has become important. The introduction of accounting systems and information within social care has been described as a conflict between “costing and caring” (Llewellyn, 1998a). Research has focused on how accounting manifests actions (Bracci and Llewellyn, 2012; Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016; Kraus, 2012; Schröder, 2019a, 2019b).

Cost-consciousness is associated with accounting techniques and cost reductions (Velasquez *et al.*, 2015). Thus, it may conflict with norms and values in social services, where professionals determine the services provided to citizens based on their individual needs (Abernethy *et al.*, 2007; Schröder, 2019a). Consequently, professionals often respond with resistance because they perceive the introduction of new accounting techniques and controls as threats to their autonomy (Buckmaster, 2018; Purcell and Chow, 2011) or because the delegation of responsibilities fails to include front-line workers (Llewellyn, 1998b). However, research has also shown that professionals commit to financial targets and willingly accept financial responsibilities (Lehtonen, 2007; Kurunmäki *et al.*, 2003; Kurunmäki, 2004). Furthermore, Carlsson-Wall *et al.* (2016) showed that “accounting talk” (Ahrens, 1997; Hall, 2010; Jönsson and Solli, 1993) that uses metaphorical representation “contributed to achieving a greater financial consciousness and more financial appropriate behaviour among front-line workers” (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016, p. 234).

When new forms of accounting are introduced, middle managers have a crucial role as change agents (Bukh and Svanholt, 2020; Deschamps, 2019; Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008) where they “actively shape organisational development trajectories” (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016, p. 215). In particular, we study how the managers actively engage in interpreting, using and communicating accounting information and how managers make sense of accounting and changes when new information and practices are linked to familiar ones. Specifically, the study addresses the following three research questions:

- RQ1. How does the introduction of new accounting information influence how managers and professionals understand cost-consciousness?
- RQ2. How do managers use accounting information to frame professional organizational members’ understanding of the intended changes?
- RQ3. What are the results of the introduction of a cost-conscious culture within social services?

In this paper, we focus on middle managers, when the need for improved cost-consciousness is introduced to a Danish municipality’s social service department (i.e. Alpha). We draw on sensemaking (Weick, 1995) as a “theoretical lens” (Lukka and Vinnari, 2014, p. 1309) to address these questions and explore how managers, as change agents, use accounting information to improve cost-consciousness. In addressing the research questions, the study makes three contributions.

First, the study contributes to the cost-consciousness literature by demonstrating how accounting information link cost-consciousness to daily operational decisions in practice. On the one hand, previous research (Abernethy and Vagnoni, 2004; Shields and Young, 1994) has examined specific factors that drive cost-consciousness. On the other hand, cost-consciousness has been associated with organizational culture, suggesting a strong role of management control systems “in the driving of cost consciousness” (Velasquez *et al.*, 2015, p.70). However, research on how accounting, accounting knowledge and accounting

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information influence culture in practice to foster cost-consciousness is less clear. This study fills this gap by showing how managers' ability to link cost-consciousness to daily work using accounting information influences organizational culture in relation to cost-consciousness.

Furthermore, the study adds to the cost-consciousness literature by illustrating the implications of cost-consciousness for operational decisions. As mentioned in [Velasquez et al.'s \(2015\)](#) review, cost-consciousness has been associated with a general focus on reducing costs and using budgets with abstract cost awareness. Specific studies define cost-consciousness as an economic judgment of operations ([Kurunmäki, 1999](#), p. 121) or economic efficiency ([Nor-Aziah and Scapens, 2007](#), p. 217), rather than an attempt to capture the trade-off between "costing and caring" described by [Llewellyn \(1998a; cf. Abernethy and Vagnoni, 2004](#), p. 213). This study supplements extant literature by showing that cost-consciousness is not only a matter of cost reductions but also of managing the trade-off between cost and care in daily work.

Second, the study contributes to the literature about the role of accounting information in public sector services organizations by showing how managers can use accounting information and accounting metaphors ([Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016](#)) to trigger sensemaking and drive change. Some researchers ([Llewellyn, 1998b; Nyland and Pettersen, 2004](#)) have found that the increased use of accounting techniques and information do not change core values and work practices, and professional work can be reconciled with accounting techniques ([Kraus, 2012](#)). However, other researchers ([Buckmaster, 2018; Chow et al., 2019; Liljegren, 2012](#)) have emphasized how professionals respond to resistance, especially when accounting practices "are perceived to be in conflict with their clients' needs" ([Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016](#), p. 220). Recent research ([Schröder, 2019a, 2019b](#)) has pointed to the question of how cost accounts and needs are introduced and connected in practice. Therefore, we add to extant research by highlighting middle managers' critical role in the introduction of accounting information and accounting techniques. Similar to [Carlsson-Wall et al. \(2016\)](#), this study shows the effectiveness of metaphors when cost and needs are connected in daily practice.

Third, this study contributes to the literature about how management control influence professions and professional values ([Abbott, 1988; Chow et al., 2019; Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Evetts, 2009; Noordegraaf, 2007; Wällstedt, 2017](#)), by indicating how accounting information may professionalize social work. Research on professional work has primarily focused on health care, wherein professionals are expected to have legitimate expertise that can only be regulated by other professionals ([Abbott, 1988](#)) and where professionalism is based on the application of scientific knowledge ([Noordegraaf, 2007](#), p. 765). In contrast, social work focuses on the relationship with the client ([Parton, 2008](#)) wherein complexity creates uncertainty because of the lack of technical knowledge about the nature of problems and their solutions ([Llewellyn, 1998a](#)). Consequently, professional control is difficult to institutionalize. This study contributes to the extant literature by highlighting how professionalism may be strengthened based on accounting information.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 briefly reviews the literature on professional social work, showing how professionalism can potentially be influenced by accounting information and accountingization, Section 3 introduces the analytical framework and explains how a sensemaking perspective is used, Section 4 presents the study's empirical setting and describes the methodology, Section 5 analyzes how changes in accounting information trigger and enable sensemaking processes at the managerial level and how outcomes of these processes lead to new working practices and prime understanding and Section 6 discusses the results and concludes the paper.

## 2. Accounting information in social work

Research has often focused on the diffusion of management accounting techniques from the private sector to the public sector and how this has influenced reforms and changes. This emphasis on management accounting techniques, including cost measures, has been described as a process of “accountingization” (Power and Laughlin, 1992) where accounting as an economic language colonizes professional cultures and where the professional practice is threatened. This has also been the case with social work where relationships have been a primary tool since the 1970s (Parton, 2008). However, the increased use of techniques of computation and calculation, procedures of examination and standardization (Miller and Rose, 1990, p. 8) challenge the professional culture and the meaning of social work.

### 2.1 Professional social work

Classic pure professionals (e.g. medical doctors) have traditionally been considered collegial, self-regulating expert occupations, where professional autonomy includes legitimate expertise that only professionals can regulate (Abbott, 1988). Further, Noordegraaf (2007) has emphasized that professionalism “is perceived to be about applying general, scientific knowledge to specific cases in rigorous and therefore routinized or institutionalized ways” (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 765).

The professionalism based on occupancy has, however, been challenged because professionals increasingly are part of larger organizations (Evetts, 2009, 2011), and Schott *et al.* (2016) have argued that ideas about professionalism have been shifting and that professionalism is increasingly being perceived as embedded in a broad organizational and societal context. In relation to social work, Lewellyn (1998a) argued that the high levels of complexity of social services create uncertainty because of the lack of technical knowledge about the nature of problems and their solutions. Consequently, it is difficult to institutionalize professional control, and as Wallstedt (2017) emphasized, social work’s claim to be a profession is challenged because social work does not form a sufficiently coherent body of abstract knowledge.

### 2.2 Resistance or adopting of accounting information

Research has shown that professional work can be reconciled with accounting techniques (Kraus, 2012; Kurunmäki *et al.*, 2003; Llewellyn, 1998a), that professionals can become committed to financial targets, and that they can be willing to accept financial responsibility (Lehtonen, 2007; Kurunmäki *et al.*, 2003; Kurunmäki, 2004).

Contrary to these optimistic accounts related to the use of accounting information, it must also be noted that the new responsibilities and the uses of accounting concepts change or challenge, as many authors argued (Chow *et al.*, 2019; Miller and Rose, 1990), core values underpinning the identities of professionals. Research within social services (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016; Kraus, 2012) has shown that front-line professionals tend to “resist accounting practices that are perceived to be in conflict with their clients’ needs” (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016, p. 220). In general, professionals often respond with resistance (Liljegren, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2015; Schott *et al.*, 2016) because they perceive the introduction of new accounting techniques and controls as threats to their autonomy (Buckmaster, 2018; Purcell and Chow, 2011) or because the systems fail to consider and include professional unique characteristics in their designs as shown by Abernethy and Stoelwinder (1995).

The increasing reliance on management accounting systems and accounting information may lead to a weakening of professions as reflective professional tasks become routinized (Abbott, 1988) or when professional values are subordinated to financial and administrative tasks (Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Skærbæk and Thorbjørnsen, 2007). However, the use of

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management accounting might also contribute to additional reflective work procedures, strengthen professional communication and reflection and retain professional values (Wallstedt, 2017).

### 3. Sensemaking perspective

On the basis of the earlier work of Weick (1979), Weick (1995) developed sensemaking as an approach for understanding the process of organizing. We use sensemaking as a theoretical lens (Lukka and Vinnari, 2014) to explore how managers, as a change agent, use accounting information to improve cost-consciousness. Rather than focusing solely on the change-process outcomes, sensemaking provides insights into how individuals and organizations give meaning to events “that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some way violate expectations” (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 57).

#### 3.1 Sensemaking processes

Weick (1995) focused especially on how people enact, i.e. actively construct the environment that they attend to by creating new features, which they pay attention to, in the environment. This process is guided by the mental models of organizational members and people’s sensemaking process is hence limited by their ability to identify and bracket cues (i. e. isolate and focus on specific stimuli rather than other). Consequently, different people can, in principle, bracket different cues in similar situations and hence act differently.

According to Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p. 59), sensemaking comprises three interrelated and recursive processes or “sensemaking moves.” The first move involves how issues, events, or situations, wherein meaning is ambiguous or outcome uncertain, become triggers for sensemaking. This implies noticing and extracting cues from the environment and bracketing them. The second move involves the construction of intersubjective meaning, e.g. when managers advocate for a particular understanding and attempt to influence others’ understanding or when the sense is created as actors together establish their understanding of an issue (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 78). Finally, the third move involves actions, including acting to restore the sense of interrupted activity (Sonenshein, 2010). Actions are an important part of the sensemaking framework because along with creating cues that actors can focus on, they also provide provisional sense to be tested through actions.

The two processes, sensegiving and sensebreaking, are especially important for understanding how sensemaking is accomplished (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). First, sensegiving involves attempts to influence the sensemaking of others. Sensegiving is often studied in relation to how managers strategically influence the sensemaking of organizational members by using symbols, images, and other sensegiving devices (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Such devices have, as Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) argued, the strength to actively alter and influence the construction of the meaning of organizational members, which, for managers, aims to reach a preferred interpretation of the change.

Second, sensebreaking defined as “the destruction or breaking-down of meaning” (Pratt, 2000, p. 464), is important as it motivates people to re-consider previously established sense. Thus, sensebreaking can be used by managers to undermine present courses of action and understanding before introducing new ways of doing things (Pratt, 2000).

However, given that sensemaking is a recursive social process (Weick, 1995), managers are influenced by the environment in which they engage (Maitlis, 2005). Additionally, as argued by Maitlis and Lawrence (2007), when managers engage in sensegiving activities with organizational members, they will be influenced and will extract cues from them to influence their interpretations of the change.

### 3.2 Professionals' sensemaking

Professionals make sense of changes and figure out ways to integrate new practices (Thurlow and Mills, 2009; Kristiansen *et al.*, 2015). The sensemaking literature does not specifically address the distinctive characteristics of a profession as such. Rather, professionalism is conceptualized as mental models (Weick, 1995) acquired by professionals during work, training, education and individual life experience (Weick, 1995; Avby, 2015), helping professionals recognize and guide responses in daily practices (Weick, 1995).

Previous literature (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2003; Dunbar and Garud, 2009) has shown that changes in work practices might not succeed in triggering the sensemaking of organizational members if group norms or organizational cultures mitigate against it. Instead, professionals may choose to accommodate, explain away or normalize discrepant cues, even when the cues significantly disrupt identity or goals. According to Sonenshein (2010), organizational members may also actively resist efforts from managers to influence the changes on the basis of their own interpretations, or, as shown by Apker (2004), it may result in professionals viewing change with ambiguity and impair the connection with their work practices and the mental models guiding them. Further, Llewellyn's (1998a) findings showed how social workers separated costs from care and indicated how changes in the design of control systems were likely to trigger social workers' sensemaking processes.

Consequently, initiating and engaging in sensegiving activities (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005) is crucial for managers to trigger sensemaking and influence the interpretation of organizational members with the aim of shaping the trajectory of change. Thus, in the process of sensegiving, managers must understand and account for the mental models of social workers and guide the process of change through a process that alters the mental model and restores identity and goals according to the new work practices.

### 3.3 Role of accounting information and metaphors

Accounting information is important cues, for example, when deviations from expectations are noticed and accounting information is mobilized through sensegiving processes, wherein new numbers and operational causalities are enacted. Furthermore, the sensemaking literature has emphasized that the use of accounting procedures and information creates frames that reinforce action and create sustained action when actions are justified as part of the sensemaking because a source of justification is simply to continue acting and identifying the benefits of the action (Swieringa and Weick, 1987, p. 304). Thus, accounting information and procedures function as framing devices wherein accounting numbers increase the persuasiveness of arguments (Goretzki *et al.*, 2018).

However, an accounting frame is incomplete and needs to be related to other frames and mental models to work as a sensemaking device as explained by Abrahamsson *et al.* (2016). This can be achieved by relating accounting information directly to concepts meaningful to organizational members in their daily work (Ahrens, 1997; Goretzki *et al.*, 2018; Jönsson and Solli, 1993). Nevertheless, it can also be done through the use of metaphors (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016) that link accounting concept representation and information metaphors, that is, something to which it is not literally applicable (Palmer and Dunford, 1996).

Individuals enact new mental models, which they typically perform through language articulations. The first language articulation is often a metaphor (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995, p. 1062), which captures the tension between conceptualization and present. Such metaphors are important rhetorical devices that generate new meanings, which go beyond those of previous similarities (Cornelissen, 2005) and connect cues with mental models. For instance, when managers explain previous actions to influence others' understanding, metaphors have a powerful role in "validating some accounts and discrediting others" (Maitlis and

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Christianson, 2014, p. 83) providing justification for certain actions to others (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016; Cornelissen, 2012; Palmer and Dunford, 1996).

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research site

The empirical part of the paper is based on a qualitative methodology. It explores sensemaking activities related to the introduction of a need for improved cost-consciousness, in the social service department of a Danish municipality (i.e. Alpha). Denmark has a long history of providing publicly funded social services. The area is regulated by the Danish Social Services Act, and the provision of social services is one of the significant legal responsibilities of the governments of 98 municipalities that work as closely as possible with citizens and the local environment. The social services can be broadly divided into three types: elderly care, special needs for children and special needs for adults. These services exist per the Social Services Act and are regulated according to separate directives. The different services are most often organized in separate departments within each municipality.

Alpha is a medium-sized municipality with approximately 65,000 inhabitants in the vicinity of Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. The municipality is organized into three divisions according to the type of services provided: The City and Environment Division is among other things responsible for roads, infrastructure, environmental issues, and various kinds of permits for citizens and firms, whereas the Children and Culture Division is responsible for kindergartens, basic schools, libraries and museums. Finally, the Social, Health Care, and Work Division is responsible for services related to elderly care, health, work, psychiatry and disability. Apart from these three service divisions, the municipality has established transverse support departments for human resources, finance, and digitization. In total, Alpha has approximately 7,000 employees [1], among which approximately 850 are employed in the Social, Health, and Work Division. The Department of Psychiatry and Disability (DPD) is part of the Social, Health, and Work Division and has more than 400 employees.

The DPD is responsible for providing social services to adults above the age of 18 and is organized with centralized teams and decentralized units. The centralized teams include a quality and development team headed by the deputy manager, an administration team led by the head of the department and a purchasing team headed by a purchasing manager. The organization of the DPD is based on a so-called purchaser-provider split (Siverbo, 2004) where the purchasing team is responsible for the purchase of services from provider units. The tasks of the purchasing team include a professional assessment of needs and eligibility with referral to residential homes, workshops and homecare based on adequacy and following-up on progress for all client cases.

The decentralized part of the department comprises several provider units, including residential homes of varying sizes and workshops for mentally and physically disabled people, each led by a provider manager. Furthermore, the decentralized part of the organization includes one larger unit delivering the entire services provided for people with psychosocial disorders, including homecare, residential homes and workshops.

Alpha was chosen for this study because it has been studied by experts in the field of social services as being successful in balancing budgets within the social services. Furthermore, the management accounting systems in Alpha were often mentioned as being those of best-practices. Alpha has, for several years, been able to balance their budgets and has developed systematic and comprehensive control systems. However, they have faced financial constraints owing to the overall poor national financial situation. This has placed a

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continuous focus on efficiency and innovation in the use of resources, which has been further pressured by new target groups as a consequence of increases in the number of clients being diagnosed and becoming eligible for services. Consequently, Alpha developed new management accounting principles and introduced new techniques and concepts to create awareness among social workers to create cost-consciousness in social work.

#### *4.2 Data collection*

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This study uses a qualitative methodology to address the research questions because qualitative methods are well suited to the study of dynamic processes related to sensemaking (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) and to comprehend complexity (Flick, 2009) akin to processes of interaction between accounting and professional settings. Following the sensemaking perspective, the accounts given by the managers through narratives, stories and explanations are essential for retrospectively making sense of the disrupted activities and their restoration (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 2001).

In the paper, we focus on the DPD in Alpha. From most municipalities, this area has experienced higher expenses, greater difficulties in complying with budgets and limited insights into the cost and quality of social services compared with other parts of the public sector. The study was conducted in May 2012 using semi-structured interviews and documents from the municipality, including action plans and annual budget reviews.

We interviewed 13 individuals, including five senior managers, five middle managers and three staff specialists. Senior management interviewees included the director and deputy director in the Social, Health Care, and Work Division, the department head and deputy head of the Psychiatry and Disability department, and the municipality's head of Budgeting and Analysis. Interviews with middle management included the manager responsible for purchasing and referrals in the DPD and four managers responsible for the service provider units. Interviews also included two staff specialists from the DPD. Both staff specialists were educated within social work and had many years of experience within the field. Further, a controller from the finance department was interviewed.

Although the number of interviews is less than that in most qualitative studies (Saunders and Townsend, 2016) it should be noted that all senior managers at the Social, Health Care, and Work Division as well as the DPD were interviewed. Out of a total of eight middle managers in the DPD, we interviewed five; four of them were responsible for service provider units and one was the purchasing manager. However, the middle managers constitute a fairly homogenous group, and the number of interviews was judged to be sufficient to reach saturation.

The interview protocol was structured into six themes. The first theme addressed questions about the position, education and experience of the interviewee, and the second theme focused on the organization and the interviewee's view on the history of the organization, along with the interviewees' views on present and future challenges. This was followed by a third theme, where interviewees were asked what they found to be the most important aspect of the budgeting and planning systems. The fourth theme established an understanding of how budgeting systems and professional competencies are related in daily operations and the fifth theme addressed how long-term planning was regarded and prioritized, both as part of the budgeting and planning system and in daily practice. Finally, questions within the sixth theme queried internal and external collaborations to understand the level of influence in daily practice, the political organization and its collaboration with the administration.

The specific questions were open-ended to give managers an opportunity to introduce and explain issues of concern in relation to the changes in the accounting information. Thus,

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the interview protocol was governed by a need to enable the managers to contribute with stories important to them, thereby making it possible to explore their processes of interpretation that led them to make sense of changes and to decide if and how to engage in activities to influence organizational members and shape the path of change. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h, frequently extending beyond the allotted time. All interviewees were assured of confidentiality.

#### *4.3 Data analysis*

In the analysis, we follow [Sonenshein \(2010\)](#)'s methodological approach and use individuals' discourse to create a composite narrative to summarize the collective constructions of meanings. In the analysis, the composite narratives are based on the interviewed managers' explanations, understandings and interpretations of the change process from which a sequential structure ([Pentland, 1999](#)) was identified to give meaning to events.

All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, and, along with collected documents, analyzed using the NVIVO ten qualitative software package. This made it possible to use a systematic approach for data reduction, classification and interpretation to reduce the qualitative data's analytical bias, which improved the study's reliability. It also improved validity by making sure that a fit existed between theory, research themes and what was actually observed and identified during data collection and analysis.

The data were coded in three rounds. Initially, the coding was done to identify management accounting and control elements, e.g. "budgets," "spreadsheets" and "variance analysis," as well as to mention accounting information and issues related to cost-consciousness. Second, the data were coded to track the chronological structure of the narrative, for example, by using codes related to the "time of pressure" on budgets and "identifying increasing costs." Finally, the data was coded using the theoretical concepts from sensemaking theory to maintain a connection between the data and the analysis. The codes used for the last part were divided into three groups: (1) "environmental cues;" (2) "interpretation," "enactment of new work practices," "understandings," and "links;" and (3) "sensegiving" and "sensebreaking" practices.

## **5. Findings**

### *5.1 Move I: noticing and extracting cues*

In the mid-2000s, Alpha introduced management by objectives within all divisions, including a strict budget follow-up to make all departments comply with budget goals. Nevertheless, DPD had been allowed to exceed budgets for many years or, as the head of the department emphasized: "nobody really knew how much money Alpha was spending on the area of disability and psychiatry." The problem was that the financial consequences of referral processes of eligible clients to services were not registered in any system capable of extracting cost information related to individual client cases. Consequently, the department's management team did not have appropriate accounting information about what services were purchased, for what period of time, and its related costs. Thus, it was only after the bills arrived from the supplier that the department knew about the costs.

Given that the financial resources were not unlimited, it was soon realized that major changes were necessary. Management responded by implementing tools enabling the department to obtain necessary financial and nonfinancial information, including continuous budget follow-ups and service monitoring of client cases. This included processes where caseworkers provide the finance department with information concerning referrals to register data systematically.

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## GRAM

These changes interrupted how the department accomplished things and forced the organization to engage in sensemaking efforts concerning how to work and how to consider costs. The information derived from the budgeting system became an important cue for the management, indicating that something had to be done, and without further changes in the budgeting and planning system, costs would continue to increase:

... we could see that we were using way too much money compared to the money allocated. We could see that if we continued down this path, as new clients continued entering, we would never have enough money to cover the expenses (Head of Department).

The management team found that they were unable to explain why costs increased year after year and whether this was related to increases in the number of clients or the growing needs of the clients already receiving care:

We had no idea how many [clients] were in residential homes and when bills came it sometimes was like it was from someone we did not even know about. It is five years since we developed the Excel sheet all from scratch (Director).

As explained by the director, the department decided to develop an Excel sheet (Table 1) that came to be known as the purchasing budget. This Excel sheet contained information at a much more detailed level:

We have worked a lot on our purchasing budget, and we have developed an Excel sheet-based tool providing information on the client and what services [...] and when new services have been provided, we make sure to register them (Deputy Manager).

The purchasing budget included all relevant information about each client receiving social services from Alpha and was anchored to daily work practice as the numbers could be decomposed and related to clients and caseworkers' decisions in principle. Every time referral to services was approved to a new client, the civil registration number was entered together with the information about the type of service, the service provider and the legal basis for providing the service as shown in Table 1. Further, the starting and expected end date of the service and daily costs were entered by the caseworker. Then, the expense estimate for the entire year was automatically calculated. If additional services were later approved for the client, these services were added and any changes in duration or service cost were entered into the spreadsheet.

In this way, the purchasing budget served a dual purpose. On the one hand, the department controlled the budget by comparing it monthly with all service purchases and update year-end spending prognoses. On the other hand, they followed-up on individual cases, ensuring that client services remained adequate. Thus, the purchasing budget became a tool used for the everyday control of costs, professionally as well as financially. This way,

**Table 1.**  
Structure of the  
purchasing budget

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Civil reg. no.	Target group	Type of service	Service provider	Legislative section	Daily rate (euros)	Start date	End date (if decided)	Estimated yearly cost (euros)
Client 1	Psychiatry	Workshop	Carl's Café	SSA §103	60	01.01.2015	–	21.900
Client 2	Social problems	Homecare	Team 1	SSA §85	40	01.01.2012	31.10.2012	12.166
Client 3	Disability	Residential home	The Corner House	SSA §108	450	30.06.2004	–	164.250
Client 3	Disability	Workshop	BAS	SSA §104	70	30.06.2004	–	25.550

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it was possible for management to monitor costs and analyze deviations between consumption and budgets down to the client level, including aggregates.

The department also used the historical data for prognosis and analysis of developments in the number of clients and cost per client. [Table 2](#) illustrates that the information was also included as a note in the annual budget approved by the municipal Political Committee of Psychiatry and Disability. Hence, updated information about the number of clients within the overall target groups and expected costs were used for budgeting of the expected future costs of service purchases.

The analysis initiated in [Table 2](#) triggered an increase not only in total costs but also in the clients' intake and social service demand from the dialog at staff meetings. However, establishing an overall view of the reasons for the rising costs based on recent information was not possible. Although the results in the spreadsheet were expressed in monetary terms, the calculations reflected professional future demand assessment.

The department head emphasized that before developing the purchasing budget, conducting a detailed and precise analysis was impossible for DPD. Thus, the accounting information from the analysis became cues for the management in the process of framing the need for change. The management gained awareness of developments and the client group's tendencies and how they increase costs. For example, the analysis showed an increasing net intake within the client group with autism while also indicating new clients' tendency to enter Alpha's social services, requiring additional service costs compared with providing existing clients.

### 5.2 Move II: interpretation process

In 2010, the municipalities in Denmark were faced with a new budget constraint imposed by the government. Consequently, for Alpha, it was necessary to reduce spending in all divisions, and the deputy manager realized, "[. . .] our finances are under pressure, because the finances of the municipalities in general is under pressure." Although cost reductions could be the apparent answer, the deputy manager interpreted the information from the previous analyses and came to the conclusion that cost cutting was not an option. The cost estimates expressed professional judgments and it was maintained that the needs of the client were just as important as controlling costs:

At the same time, social service is a field with lots of pressure, and the many eligible clients entering, they need care, and these services are often very expensive. We cannot just say no, and we don't wish to necessarily. But the challenge is enormous (Deputy Manager).

[Table 2](#) shows that the deputy manager initiated several follow-up analyses related to the budget note to further improve the budget. [Table 3](#) shows the intake of clients previously serviced by the Department of Children and Youth (DCY) that was analyzed for 2008–2010.

	Lowest price (euros)	Highest price (euros)	Median (euros)	Total no. of clients in the target group
Psychiatry	15.000	135.000	40.000–53.000	54
Physical disability	16.000	220.000	133.000–200.000	46
Impaired mental functioning	2.200	493.000	93.000–107.000	100
Autism	15.000	456.000	133.000–145.000	33
Drug abuse	26.000	99.000	–	4

**Table 2.**  
Format of the analysis of the cost structure included as a note in the budget approved by the Political Committee of Psychiatry and Disability

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Thus, interpretation of the analysis results generated new understandings as the details of the accounting information not only increased but also increasingly integrated professional knowledge, which previously was not part of the overall budget. Analyzing the increasingly detailed and complex information required interactions and close cooperation with caseworkers, who had knowledge about the client case details. Specific areas and services, such as demand increases in homecare-based services, were carefully scrutinized. Thus, accounting information extracted from the analysis was important for the interpretation. Further, the accounting information was used, not only among the managers but within the organization and the overview gained from the spreadsheets proved to be useful for managing the client cases.

The financial challenge was also interpreted by management as an opportunity to improve the quality of social work while simultaneously balancing the budget. Cost-consciousness as a basic value in social work was enacted for controlling and directing social work in the department rather than for cost reductions. It was recognized that inadequate assessment of needs and eligibility and adequacy of services were the most important cost drivers. Based on the detailed and precise accounting information extracted from the analysis and its follow-up, the management's interpretation of the challenges implied that improving social work practices and incorporating the financial demands would recreate order.

However, the interpretation was also connected to an initiative from top management, which had resulted in comprehensive action plans for DPD developed to improve focus on the rehabilitation of clients:

[. . .] we decided, here in the department, to apply a rehabilitating approach, which means that we continuously have to assess when the client will become capable of taking care of himself. What is needed for the client to become better, so they don't need permanent care, but perhaps training enabling them to take care of themselves at a higher level. And that should also have a spill-over effect making it possible to take in more clients in our homes and training programs (Director).

As indicated by the Director's account, the focus on how resources were used had a prominent place in the new strategy despite the overall focus on rehabilitation. Financial targets or goals were not directly included in the plans, and the goals of the strategy were attached to the financial challenges, such as the following example. "The goal with rehabilitation is to make clients more self-reliant. That will release resources to clients with increased needs" (Disability action plan, 2020).

Even though the introduction of a rehabilitation perspective in social work was part of a strategy for responding to eligible clients' intake increases and rising costs, the perspective was also interpreted as a quality improvement initiative:

2010 prices	Total intake		Average price		Total intake		Average price	
	2008	2008 (euros)	2009	2009 (euros)	1. Quarter of 2010	1. Quarter of 2010	2010 (euros)	2010 (euros)
Psychiatry	4	117.000	3	76.000	1	1	169.000	169.000
– from DCY	1	83.000	0	0	1	0	0	0
Physical disability	1	119.000	4	69.000	0	0	0	0
– from DCY	0	0	2	32.000	0	0	0	0

**Table 3.**  
Analysis of intake of clients in 2008–2010

It is about being able to recover and being able to master your life, but we do not expect everybody to recover fully. That is not a realistic goal of rehabilitation, but we believe that our clients can be enabled to live a better life with their disability (Head of Department).

Managers interpreted the need for cost-conscious behavior in social work as being closely related to professional competency, thus reaching an interpretation that suggested an enhanced focus on costs in social work would only show full potential if used together with strong professional competencies. One of the important cues leading to this interpretation was the action plan's focus on rehabilitation. For example, the purchasing manager explained:

Now we all have to work in the same direction. Residential homes have to rehabilitate clients in order for them to move on to another less intensive residential home or to their own home, perhaps in combination with home care (Purchasing Manager).

Although the need for cost reductions triggered changes, management reiterated that costs should not take precedence over the professional assessment of client needs or the provision of care. Rather, cost-conscious behavior should include cost-effective solutions in the assessment of clients by evaluating the possibility of alternative-but-sufficient services at lower prices and an ongoing focus on providing services more adequately suiting the needs of eligible clients through a rehabilitation approach.

Most managers emphasized that, over the long-term, insufficient care would increase costs because services unable to meet the needs of the client would eventually result in the need for intensified service:

You have to make sure not to go for short-term solutions and decide not to choose a service of 150.000 euros, but that of 75.000 euros which then is not sufficient and then you have to change it again. You never really know, but this is where professional competency becomes imperative. You should never make decisions based on finances alone. That you should never do. It must be founded in professional competency (Deputy Manager).

This understanding of the relationship between costs and care depended on how most managers viewed professional social work, and professional assessments were enacted as one of the most important tools for controlling costs. Although the information on the cost of client cases had not been used in decision-making previously, the Head of Budgeting and Analysis interpreted the focus on expenses as a reinforcement of already existing practices because of the budget constraints imposed on the municipalities by the government:

I would not say that it is a new thing for Alpha to focus on being more efficient, because it has always been that way, but somehow the pressure has resulted in it becoming more legitimate to talk about how we actually do it the best way (Head of Budgeting and Analysis).

Consequently, the sustained focus on efficiency became part of the sensemaking as a justification to continue focusing on expenses and cost-consciousness.

When professional competency was enacted as the most crucial part of cost control, the complexity of the financial challenges was reduced, and further noticing and bracketing of cues were guided by a shared understanding of the importance of improving competencies and enhancing work practices. Consequently, managers noticed cues related to the daily work practices among the social workers and found that the quality of social work had been reduced not only by the previous lack of information but also by the lack of understanding of how costs related to care.

The lack of financial considerations was interpreted as plausible because, as one of the staff specialists explained, social workers are educated about the legislation and that does

not include the financing: "It is a no go with this educational [background] to talk about costs. You are simply not allowed to" (Staff Specialist 1).

For some social workers, it was merely the ignorance of costs and not possessing an understanding of the importance of controlling costs when financial resources were limited. However, for others, resistance to considering costs of social work had developed on the basis of an understanding of costs as something that would mean less quality in the provision of services. The purchasing manager explained how caseworkers would engage in discussions about the level of service in regard to individual clients:

[...] if you said someone [client] was getting too much, then the response was that then we are cutting back on disabled people. That was not seen as decent conditions (Purchasing Manager).

Noticing that part of the problem was an everyday practice where the professional approach did not include any information about costs, managers focused on social workers' lack of either focus or understanding of costs, not to mention a shared responsibility for the costs related to their work. In the bracketing of cues, this interpretation was important because it indicated that the foundation for giving attention to costs had been absent for social workers. How could they relate care with costs and take responsibility for managing costs when information on the individual level was not available to them? The managers interpreted the responses from social workers as a call for more assistance rather than only being taught about budgets and costs. Consequently, further active managerial involvement was needed to assist the social workers in making sense of cost information, and perhaps, more importantly, for making sure a link was created between costs and care in professional work practices.

### *5.3 Move III: restoring sense to the interrupted activity*

Arriving at the interpretation that the mental model of the social workers had limited their search for solutions, management had to break down sense to give sense. For the managers to create a more cost-conscious behavior, they attempted to trigger and influence sensemaking processes among social workers. Many examples were provided on how the combination of accounting information and metaphors could be used as devices. Moreover, accounting information was used to clarify the consequences of the current work practices if they were not changed and to demonstrate the importance of considering costs in social work.

As an example of how the new accounting information was used in the communication, the department head explained how she introduced links between familiar understandings of social work and a new practice of including considerations of costs related to homecare services. On the one hand, the client case management team refers clients to homecare services based on the assessment of their needs. On the other hand, the number of hours per week that the client should be assigned homecare is determined. For some clients, the service may be a few hours to allow them, for example, to read their mail and clean their home, whereas other clients need additional intensive care and help to perform their daily chores.

The department head was aware that caseworkers mainly focused on the professional need assessment in the referral process. However, they also recognized a lack of understanding of the connection between the allocated hours and related costs:

I talked to them about the assessment of clients for home care services. If each client gets just one quarter of an hour less of the allocated hours, than it equals 3 employees. Is it really that much money, they asked, and at that time it was around 130.000 euro. That made it clear to them, that

just one quarter of an hour less, adds up to a lot of money that we can spend on someone else (Head of Department).

According to the head of the department, it was not important whether a quarter of an hour was an accurate representation of needed changes because it had a symbolic meaning. Neither was it questioned by the social workers; most would probably agree that one-quarter of an hour less would not make much of a difference for most clients, hypothetically speaking. The aggregation, however, came as a surprise. Whereas 15 min may not make much of a difference in a single case, it is significant when a large number of clients receive home care. The deputy manager explained:

[. . .] If you see it from the point of a social worker, only responsible for a small group of the clients, I understand why you would think it doesn't make that much of a difference whether you make one or the other decision. But if you aggregate! And that is why it is important for them to see the connection (Deputy Manager)

The sensebreaking processes started with the interpretation of the information in the purchasing budget. However, the information also provided a new possibility for presenting the calculation to the caseworkers and communicating in staff meetings. The calculation used by the management in their analysis of homecare services is complex. Nevertheless, the calculation presented to the caseworkers was simple and only included the most important and aggregated numbers as shown in Table 4. This accounting information presentation interrupted the caseworkers' interpretation of the relationship between costs and social work as being disconnected.

A similar example was provided by one of the provider managers who noticed that costs related to social workers having meals with clients in a residential home had increased. The social workers appeared not to take into consideration how the costs of the meals affected the budget because they did not have any information about it. Realizing it would be a difficult task to talk about cutting back on costs and that it could easily end up being a discussion about values and approach in social work rather than addressing the problem, the manager made a simple calculation to provide the social workers with financial information and presented it at a staff meeting:

What we did was to set it up in an Excel sheet and ask them to have a look: this is what you spent, and this is what is allocated. They were all blown away and completely chocked (Provider Manager 1).

Showing the deviation between the allocated budget and how many resources were being spent on the activity, it was clear to the social workers that the consequence of not considering other solutions would mean fewer resources for the clients because overspending on one activity would have to be financed by the offset of others. Thus, the manager broke sense in her group of staff using accounting information, thereby allowing social workers to start new sensemaking:

I was waiting for resistance, but it did not come. They said that they got it, and that made me think that you can indeed communicate financial issues to this group. They understand it if you

Cost reduction per week from one quarter less per client (euros)	Cost reduction per year from one quarter less per client per week (euros)	Total no. of clients receiving home care services	Total cost reduction (euros)
20	1.000	130	130.000

**Table 4**  
Illustration of accounting information targeting caseworkers in the purchasing unit

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do not give them the big Excel sheet but break it down into small units that make sense to them and their daily tasks (Provider Manager 1).

Common for the examples is the use of accounting information together with a focus on having enough resources available for eligible clients. This metaphor appeared to be very strong for connecting new ways of doing things to the familiar practice and values of social work:

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I don't say that we have to reduce. We have to be able to afford the next client coming through the door, which are eligible for service and because we know they need service [. . .]. We will not provide 8 hours to someone who only needs 1, if someone else is in a need of 7 hours, and we can't provide that, because we don't have the money" (Purchasing Manager).

Thus, accounting information strengthens the understanding of the metaphor, simultaneously representing a break with the present practice. The Purchasing Manager destabilized the present practice and sensemaking because it made sense to most social workers that the consequences of not changing would be a lack of available resources. However, as explained by one of the staff specialists, linking cost-consciousness with professional competency was crucial to provide adequate care of high quality:

Our new motto has become best-less expensive which works because we will not compromise with the client's life and it's ok if things are expensive if it's the most adequate. But if we can get something equally good that is cheaper that is what we want. Anything else would be stupid (Staff Specialist 1).

Although cost was given much weight, the manager's focus on professional competency was, therefore, emphasized even more. Competencies ensure that clients receive adequate services, whereas a focus on costs would ensure the services provided were the most cost-efficient ones capable of meeting the needs.

When probed to provide examples of how changes manifested, the managers emphasized how cost considerations had become integrated into the social work practice. The purchasing manager, for instance, explained:

From not considering costs at all they always take it into account now. We look at what needs [clients] have, what our professional assessment tells us and what is sufficient. They have not just saved money; they have provided solutions that fit instead (Purchasing Manager).

One of the staff specialists explained her own journey toward a more cost-conscious approach:

I can see how I myself over the years have changed from being provoked by how much finances influenced professional decisions to understanding that if I as a professional only make professional considerations and don't care about costs, it will end being the client paying the price (Staff Specialist 2).

The managers also highlighted that social workers do not just take costs into consideration because it is required of them. They understand that increased attention to costs has been a necessary change in traditional social work and that provisioning has become more efficient. The purchasing manager gave an example of how exactly the focus on costs has become part of social work practices:

If the social workers realize that the home care provider has not been showing up for the last 3 months [. . .] Some clients are slow to react [. . .] The social worker calls, [the provider] themselves and ask for a credit note. They would never do that previously. They have committed themselves to participating in prioritizing what the money is spent on (Purchasing Manager).

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Most managers agreed that the introduction of accounting information and integrating cost-consciousness with social work had enhanced professional competence. Moreover, they firmly believed that social workers agree:

Accounting is not something scary. The caseworkers take accounting information into considerations in the professional assessments. . . Because our budget is under pressure we focus on analyses (Staff Specialist 1).

Furthermore, a manager explained how the combination of focusing more on rehabilitation and costs made it possible to change the approach in cases where clients need intensive and therefore expensive services. Previously, these services were mainly considered from a short-term perspective, whereas the focus has changed to include long-term perspectives in a bigger picture, providing intensive services to enable clients to become more self-sufficient:

You can come home and be proud that you just saved 65.000 euros because you did like this [. . .]. Being proud of finding a service that fits. Because they have not just saved the money. They have provided something that is adequate instead (Purchasing Manager).

Likewise, provider managers expressed how it had become possible to engage social workers more when prioritizing resources at their units. One manager explained, "I inform the staff [. . .] when we have a job opening. Together we will consider if we need this position. But also, what do we need?" (Provider Manager 2).

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

This study examines a Danish municipality where a need for improved cost-consciousness was introduced in the social service department. We use sensemaking as a theoretical lens to explore how managers, as change agents, used accounting information. Social work is often seen as a complex matter (Devaney and Spratt, 2009; Schott *et al.*, 2016), and social services often struggle with achieving budget goals while delivering high-quality care as shown by Llewellyn (1998a). In such settings, accounting information is often resisted (Buckmaster, 2018; Chow *et al.*, 2019; Liljegren, 2012; Schott *et al.*, 2016). Research has shown that middle managers have a crucial role as change agents (Bukh and Svanholt, 2020; Deschamps, 2019; Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016) when interpreting, using, and communicating accounting information. We studied how the introduction of new accounting information influenced the understanding of cost-consciousness, managers' use of accounting information to frame professional organizational members' understanding of the changes, and the impacts of introducing a cost-conscious culture within social services on professional values. The study makes several contributions to addressing these questions.

First, the study contributes to the cost-consciousness literature by demonstrating how accounting information can link cost-consciousness to operational decisions in daily practice. Velasquez *et al.* (2015) found in a literature review that cost-consciousness within the management accounting literature was often vaguely defined or implicitly associated with cost controls or generally focused on reducing costs and using budgets. Furthermore, Velasquez *et al.* (2015) has found that cost-consciousness is associated with organizational culture, suggesting a strong role of management control systems. Research has shown that factors such as cost-management knowledge and cost-budget participation (Shields and Young, 1994) and the availability of accounting information systems and informal authority (Abernethy and Vagnoni, 2004) drive cost-consciousness. However, research on how accounting, accounting knowledge and accounting information foster cost-consciousness in practice is less clear. Hence, this paper fills this gap by showing how managers use

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accounting information to link cost-consciousness to daily work, thus influencing organizational culture toward cost-consciousness.

When top management set directions and initiate tight control budgets, it may conflict with the demands at lower hierarchical levels where managers work closely with service delivery (Dutton *et al.*, 1997). Professionals often respond to resistance because they perceive the introduction of new accounting techniques and controls as threats to their autonomy (Buckmaster, 2018; Purcell and Chow, 2011) or because the delegation of responsibilities fails to include front-line workers (Llewellyn, 1998b). In the study, middle managers did not perceive accounting information as control or assert control over professionals. However, the changes in improved cost-consciousness captured the trade-of between “costing and caring” as described by Llewellyn (1998a; cf. Abernethy and Vagnoni, 2004, p. 213). Thus, this study supplements extant literature by indicating that cost-consciousness involves not only cost control and reductions but also the management of the trade-of between cost and care in daily work.

Second, the study contributes to the literature on the role of accounting information in public sector services by demonstrating middle managers’ critical role in the introduction of accounting information and accounting techniques. Similar to Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016, we showed the effectiveness of metaphors when cost and needs are connected in daily practices. Particularly, the study indicates that managers engaging in sensebreaking activities can disrupt current practice with contradictory evidence, which is similar to Balogun and Johnson (2004) as well as Martin-Rios (2016). The present study demonstrates the effectiveness of sensebreaking and sensegiving using not only accounting information in reporting and dialog with social workers but also accounting metaphors to demonstrate the consequences of current practice and changes.

In the change process, new reporting forms were developed. The reports connected daily decisions and work practices with overall budget objectives. The interpretation of these reports generated new understandings as the accounting information details not only increased but also integrated professional knowledge. This knowledge had not previously been included in the budgets and budgeting process. The examples presented in the study show that increasingly detailed and complex information requires interactions and close cooperation with caseworkers who have knowledge about client case details. Although client details may entail complexities, many of the reports used in the overall decision-making aggregated details to highlight important information for decision-making while simultaneously being consistent with client case details.

Many examples commonly show that accounting information is used to focus on acquiring sufficient resources available for eligible clients. This perspective was highly powerful when connecting new ways of doing things to the familiar practice and social work values. In several cases, the importance of having resources available for eligible clients was represented by numbers and metaphors that caused breaks in the scanning, interpretation, and learning dynamics of the sensemaking process. In this way, sensebreaking actions questioned, reframed and redirected attention because the sensemaking process is not about truth and getting it right as Weick (1995) emphasizes. Rather, it is about redrafting an emerging story that becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data and is more resilient in the face of criticism (Weick *et al.*, 2005).

Carlsson-Wall *et al.* (2016) has shown how managers, as change agents, may succeed in connecting new practices with familiar ones in a professional context using and verbalizing metaphors. Similarly, this study emphasizes the importance of metaphors as a device used by managers to facilitate cost-consciousness among professionals. The metaphors in the present study were used in connection with accounting information that enables managers

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to address values, norms, and beliefs within social work while also including the related costs and their crucial part in providing quality social work.

Previous research (Schröder, 2019a; Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016; Kraus and Lindholm, 2010) has pointed to the tradition within social services, where costs “are calculated based on how much time the social workers spent on the services” (Schröder, 2019a, p. 322). In the study, the metaphors connecting time estimates and social practice with cost and budgets are effective in the change process. Thus, accounting information simultaneously strengthens the understanding of the metaphor and represents a break from the present practice. The manager destabilized present practice and sensemaking because most social workers perceived the consequences of no change as a lack of available resources.

Certain research (Llewellyn, 1998b; Nyland and Pettersen, 2004) has found that the increased use of accounting techniques and information do not change core values and work practices and that professional work can be reconciled with accounting techniques (Kraus, 2012). However, other researchers (Buckmaster, 2018; Chow *et al.*, 2019; Liljegen, 2012) have emphasized how professionals respond to resistance, especially when accounting practices “are perceived to be in conflict with their clients’ needs” (Carlsson-Wall *et al.*, 2016, p. 220). In our case, when accounting information is accepted and integrated into social work without much resistance, focusing on the information is not in conflict with clients’ needs. However, accounting information is interpreted by social workers as the key to accommodating clients’ needs. Our results indicate not only an acceptance of cost-consciousness but also the availability of relevant and interpretable cost information that links work practices to budget achievement as an important antecedent for tight budget controls (Van der Stede, 2001) and social work quality.

Third, this study contributes to the literature on how management control influences professions and professional values (Abbott, 1988; Chow *et al.*, 2019; Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Evetts, 2009; Noordegraaf, 2007; Wällstedt, 2017) by indicating how accounting information may professionalize social work. Most research on the impacts of management accounting on professional work has focused on health care (Malmlose, 2019; Van Helden, 2005), wherein professionals are expected to have legitimate expertise that is regulated only by other professionals (Abbott, 1988) and where professionalism “is perceived to be about applying general, scientific knowledge to specific cases in rigorous and therefore routinized or institutionalized ways” (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 765). In contrast, social work focuses on the relationship with the client (Parton, 2008) and is based on the client’s active cooperation (Bracci and Llewellyn, 2012; Stewart, 1990), wherein complexity creates uncertainty because of the lack of technical knowledge about the nature of problems and their solutions (Llewellyn, 1998a). Consequently, institutionalizing professional control is difficult. As Wällstedt (2017) emphasized, social work’s claim to be a profession is challenged because it does not form a sufficiently coherent body of abstract knowledge.

The changes in Alpha implied tighter control, and the management was more involved in direction-setting. Thus, the study does not indicate a return to traditional job-based professionalism (Evetts, 2011) but rather a change in professionalism wherein organizational professionalism increases importance within social work. By incorporating the accounting information to social work practice, it became possible for the social workers to sustain focus on the relationship (Parton, 2008) and to reflect on their current work practices. Furthermore, the results of the present study indicate that cost-consciousness can be linked to professional practice. Thus, professionals are allowed to use new accounting techniques to align with professional work while increasingly becoming cost-conscious (Llewellyn, 1998a; Kurunmäki, 2004). Thus, this study contributes to the extant literature by highlighting how professionalism may be strengthened based on accounting information

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use. Although [Chow et al. \(2019\)](#) suggested that social work professionals could reassert their epistemology based on accounting information, they concluded that it was a distant possibility because “managerialism retains its stranglehold on social work.” Our study indicates that this future may not be very distant.

When the managers engaged in the design and development of accounting tools, principles, and methods to meet new demands of the budgeting system, the accounting information influences managers’ behavior, as also shown in previous studies ([Kraus, 2012](#); [Kurunmäki, 2004](#)). By allowing managers to influence the process of implementing change and the design of the control system within the frames defined by top management, the managers use it to build sensegiving activities aimed at shaping organizational members’ sensemaking processes and to influence how costs become linked to social work. Interpreting the result from the study, two observations in relation to the change process appear to be of importance.

First, managers connected local changes in social work to other ongoing change processes by extracting cues from the new accounting information and connecting them with cues from the ongoing change processes in the organization. In this way, a shared interpretation of the related changes emerged, contributing to the managers’ belief that the changes provided higher levels of quality care despite considerably stricter controls and demands for complying with budget goals. This indicates, as [Swieringa and Weick \(1987, p. 304\)](#) pointed out, that accounting can reinforce action when actions are justified as part of the sensemaking, because the sustained action created by self-justification based on specific accounting procedures provides a strong context for commitment.

Second, the study indicates that the managers had considerable influence in shaping the changes in the management accounting systems. Initially, the change was introduced from top management as a response to the demands of changes in financial conditions and external demands for tight budget controls. However, the changes were just as much the result of interpretations and decisions at lower organizational levels. The managers interviewed in this study appeared to exercise substantial influence on the changes not only through the design and development of relevant tools but also by influencing and shaping the understanding change among professionals.

#### Note

1. The employees at Alpha are roughly divided such that 90% of the employees work with citizen-related services, while 10% work with administrative and managerial tasks. The break-down of citizen-related employees reflects the service areas of the municipality: 28% are employed in childcare and after-school care, 24% in elderly care, 18% in primary schools, 11% in social care, health and labor market services, 3% in culture, 3% in municipal cleaning and 2% within infrastructure and public utilities.

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### About the authors

Per Nikolaj Bukh, MSc, PhD, is a professor at the Department of Business and Management, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark ([www.pnbukh.com/](http://www.pnbukh.com/)). He has published articles and books on several subjects, including budgeting, management accounting and control, payment by results and strategy.

In addition to his research activities, Per Nikolaj often contributes to postgraduate programs and conferences. Per Nikolaj Bukh is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [pnb@pnbukh.com](mailto:pnb@pnbukh.com)

Karina Skovvang Christensen is an Associate Professor at the Department of Economics, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark. She has published articles and books on several subjects, including knowledge management, formula funding and strategy.

Anne Kirstine Svanholt, M.Sc., is the Head of the Center of Drug Addiction Treatment Copenhagen, Municipality of Copenhagen, Denmark. She will submit her doctoral thesis on management and accounting in social services in 2021. Before enrolling in the PhD program at Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark, Anne Kirstine was employed in various administrative and managerial positions in the public sector.

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