

Influencing the working alliance between justice assistants and their clients: the use of the Working Alliance for Mandated Clients Inventory as a professional tool for joint reflection

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Abstract

This paper explores the conceptualization of the professional relationship between social workers and clients as a «working alliance» (WA) in a specific branch of social work, namely community supervision or, as it is described in Flanders, «social work under judicial mandate». Drawing on research in the fields of social work and psychotherapy, it is argued that collecting client feedback and organizing joint reflection can have a positive effect on the WA. In this paper I describe how a recently developed measuring instrument, the Working Alliance for Mandated Clients Inventory (WAMC-I), is used as a professional tool for joint reflection on the WA between justice assistants and their clients in Flanders.

The findings of the present study confirm the importance of the WA in community supervision practice. Although using the WAMC-I as a tool for joint reflection initially encountered resistance amongst justice assistants, the data show a growing consensus regarding the perceived usability and relevance of the instrument in practice. A majority of justice assistants and clients report that the use of the WAMC-I as a tool for joint reflection in community supervision practice has an added value.

Keywords

Working alliance, social work under judicial mandate, professional tool, joint reflection.

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Introduction

The professional relationship has been described as the core of social work practice by several scholars (Blom, 2002; Knei-Paz, 2009; Alexander & Charles, 2009; Perlinski, Blom, & Morén, 2012; Payne, 2014) in the sense that the relationship between social worker and client provides the fundamental conditions in which processes of human change primarily take place (Blom, 2009). To capture these fundamental conditions, this professional relationship can be conceptualized as a «working alliance» (WA). In brief, three important elements shape this WA: an agreement on the *goals* of the change process, consensus on the *tasks* that must be completed to achieve these goals and a *bond* between worker and client that facilitates collaboration (Bordin, 1979).

In order to develop good professional relationships within social work practice, it is essential that practitioners and clients communicate adequately in order to understand each other's role and are able to benefit by learning how they perceive each other, their professional relationship and the goals of the intervention (Cameron & King Keenan, 2010). In this perspective, obtaining client feedback is important to evaluate the professional relationship between social worker and client (Allen et al., 2016).

This paper explores the use of the concept of the WA (Bordin, 1979) to describe the professional relationship between practitioners and clients in a specific branch of social work: the field of community supervision. Drawing on the knowledge of the use of client feedback in social work and psychotherapy, the two main research questions in the present study are: 1) how can a recently developed measurement instrument for the WA in a mandated context (Menger, 2018) be used as a tool for joint reflection in Flemish¹ community supervision; 2) how do justice assistants² and clients perceive the use of this instrument as a professional tool for joint reflection on the quality of their WA?

In Flanders, community supervision is described as «social work under judicial mandate» in official policy documents (Bauwens & Devos, 2015, p. 12). The mandate refers to the court rulings that shape the coerced supervision of offenders. In brief, justice assistants in Flanders have a double role. On the one hand they supervise and control the conditions that are imposed by a judicial mandate (e.g. probation, conditional release or electronic monitoring). This role entails regular reports to the mandating authority regarding (non-)compliance with conditions. On the other hand, justice assistants are expected to provide guidance, advice and information to their clients and refer them to the appropriate services (e.g. psychological counseling or treatment, social care, etc.) if necessary (Claessens, 2012; Bauwens & Devos, 2015). Despite policy reform and in contrast to other European countries (e.g. England and Wales), community supervision in Flanders remains strongly aligned with traditional social work methods and values. The

¹ «Flemish» refers to Flanders, the Dutch-speaking Northern part of Belgium.

² A justice assistant is the equivalent of a social professional who in other countries is often referred to as a probation officer.

code of conduct of justice assistants stipulates that principles of respect, authenticity and empathy are central to their work and advocates the development of a positive professional relationship that fosters a process of change in which supporting the capabilities of offenders is emphasized (Bauwens & Roose, 2017).

However, the acknowledgment of the paramount importance of the WA between workers and clients did not put a thorough and profound examination of this alliance high on the social work research agenda. Perlinski et al. (2012) point out that social work researchers and practitioners who are interested in the professional relationship have primarily drawn on research and practice experience from the field of psychotherapy in which an abundant body of literature on this topic is present.

Therefore, the scientific value of this study is twofold: firstly, community supervision practice, although firmly rooted in social work, has attracted relatively little attention from social work researchers. Moreover, the paramount importance of the professional relationship between practitioners and mandated clients is recognized in policy and practice, but academic research on this specific topic remains scarce. This article aims to contribute to closing this gap in research. Secondly, this study introduces the standardized measure of the WAMC-I as a tool that can facilitate joint reflection between practitioners and clients. Facilitating feedback on the quality of the WA using a standardized instrument has been advocated in e.g. the fields of psychotherapy and mental health social work, but not in community supervision practice.

In the theoretical framework of this paper, the conceptualization of the professional relationship in community supervision as a WA is explored, as well as the use of client feedback. Following a description of the methodology, the results of the empirical study on the use of the WAMC-I as a professional tool for joint reflection are presented and discussed.

The working alliance

The importance of the professional relationship between social workers and clients has been advocated by several scholars (Blom, 2002; Knei-Paz, 2009; Alexander & Charles, 2009; Blom, 2009; Perlinski et al., 2012; Payne, 2014). Next to social network factors, factors relating to the social worker, client factors and practice strategies, relationship factors have been identified as a significant common factor that positively influences the outcome of social work interventions (Cameron & King Keenan, 2010). Concepts as the «professional relationship», «working relationship», «therapeutic relationship», «therapeutic alliance» or «working alliance» have originated from the field of psychotherapy, but also found their way into social work research and practice. Notwithstanding an agreement on the critical role of the professional relationship, there are differences in the way scholars have conceptualized this relationship (Shick Tryon, Collins Blackwell, &

Felleman Hammel, 2007). In an attempt to overarch these different conceptualizations, it was Bordin (1979) who introduced the WA as a pan-theoretical concept, applicable in all processes of human change in general. In this perspective, the concept can be used in every situation that involves making changes in people's lives, e.g. in social work (Ross, Polaschek, & Ward, 2008).

The working alliance in the mandated context of community supervision

The reason to adopt the concept of the WA to capture the professional relationship between practitioners and clients in community supervision is threefold.

1. While traditional «relationship» concepts primarily stress the importance of attitudes and behavior of the practitioner in establishing a professional relationship, the concept of the WA focusses on a collaborative stance between client and practitioner, implying a more active role for clients in processes of change (Flückiger et al., 2018). Applied to the context of community supervision, this means that both practitioner and client have an active role in the construction of a WA that can foster a process towards desistance from crime.
2. Traditional «relationship» concepts are considered to be universal: regardless of the context, specific intervention goals or methods used, establishing a professional relationship is seen as a necessary prerequisite before working towards specific goals (Rogers, 1957). In contrast, the concept of the WA entails that the goals of intervention actually determine the kind of bond that is necessary to achieve those goals. In community supervision, goals are largely predetermined by the legal mandate and the conditions that are imposed. The WA in a mandated context therefore primarily focusses on mutual agreement on goals and the tasks that are necessary to achieve those goals. A bond remains necessary to facilitate collaboration between practitioner and client, but does not constitute a goal in itself. The element of bond is not a synonym for the warm, trusting relationship that is considered to be universal in the traditional «relationship» concepts.
3. It has been argued that goals, tasks and bond, the three elements of the WA distinguished by Bordin (1979), are also present in community supervision (Ross et al., 2008; Wild, 2011; DeLude, Mitchell, & Barber, 2012; Hart & Collins, 2014; Menger, 2018). Nevertheless, the complexity of a mandated context also causes difficulties applying the concept to the specific situation of community supervision. Bordin (1979) stresses the importance of collaboratively determining mutual goals and tasks to reach those goals, whereas in community supervision goals and tasks are often predetermined by a legal mandate (Kozar & Day, 2012; Bourgon & Gutierrez, 2013; Hart & Collins, 2014). A second element that makes

the concept of the WA as developed by Bordin (1979) more difficult to apply to the context of community supervision concerns the dual role that practitioners need to develop. On the one hand, they need to monitor client's compliance with imposed conditions and report to a mandating authority, on the other hand practitioners are expected to support clients in their personal process of desistance from crime. The element of control leads to a disproportionate power structure in the relationship with the client and can make it more difficult to establish a collaborative relationship, let alone a relationship based on trust (Skeem et al., 2007).

Drawing on these critiques, research by Menger (2018) has concluded that the three traditional elements of the WA (goals, tasks and bond) are important, yet insufficient to capture the complexity of the professional relationship in a mandated context. Therefore, the theoretical model of the WA was adapted and expanded. The core of the new theoretical model consists of one negative and three positive characteristics of the WA in a mandated context. The positive characteristics are shared goals and tasks, bond and trust and the clarity of rules and regulations, the negative characteristic is reactance (Menger, 2018).

Shared goals and tasks

Just as voluntary change processes, community supervision is also aiming to attain certain goals and to achieve these goals, certain tasks have to be performed. However, goals and tasks in community supervision are primarily shaped by a legal mandate. Since this mandate is actually the *raison d'être* for the professional relationship between practitioners and clients in community supervision, the importance of clear, shared goals and specific tasks is paramount.

Bond and trust

In the pan-theoretical concept of the WA, bond stands for a collaboration between client and practitioner that is characterized by mutual respect, appreciation and trust (Bordin, 1979). Menger (2018) retains this interpretation in her new theoretical model, but emphasizes the importance of trust by explicitly naming it as a characteristic of the WA in a mandated context. Bond refers to the extent to which clients and practitioners commit themselves to the supervision process and to each other as actors in that process. In order to establish a bond, clients need to have sufficient trust and willingness to openly discuss their needs and problems. On the other hand, a realistic amount of trust of practitioners in the positive intentions of their clients can foster a successful collaboration. In order to

have a good quality WA in a mandated context, bond and trust have to be strong enough to enable both parties to achieve the goals predefined by the mandate.

Clarity of rules and regulations

The third characteristic, clarity of rules and regulations, is derived from the concept of relational fairness which is considered to have a large impact on the quality of the WA in a mandated context (Skeem et al., 2007). Relational fairness refers to how clear the framework of supervision, mutual obligations and the limits of the mandate are expressed and to which extent the rules and regulations of supervision are consistently, but also flexibly and respectfully enforced throughout the supervision process. Upholding relational fairness avoids unrealistic expectations from clients and possibly keeps practitioners from developing an authoritarian style that would negatively impact the quality of the WA (Menger, 2018).

Reactance

Reactance is considered as a characteristic of the interaction between client and practitioner that reflects negatively on the WA. Reactance can be influenced by both actors. In community supervision clients can show reactance for example by actively or passively challenging the involuntary character of supervision in general or one or more imposed conditions in particular. Especially when client reactance is directed towards the practitioner, this can have a negative impact on the quality of the WA. Practitioners can impact the WA negatively by not balancing their dual role and rigidly focusing on their controlling tasks or surveillance role (Skeem & Manchak, 2008). In doing so, they can elicit reactance of clients which again can lead to a more one-sided punitive stance of the practitioner.

The use of client feedback

Studies in the field of psychotherapy uncovered that, next to the WA, encouraging clients to provide genuine feedback on how they experience therapy, can be seen as a so-called «common factor» of effective practice (Tam & Ronan, 2017). Especially when practitioners and clients engage in a joint reflection process using a standardized feedback instrument, treatment outcomes are positively influenced: clients psychological problems are less likely to deteriorate, clients show lower risk for dropping out and are more likely to achieve a significant positive change in their lives and potential problems

in the therapeutical relationship are more easily detected and addressed (Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 2007; Anker, Duncan, & Sparks, 2009; Lambert & Shimokawa, 2011; Winkeljohn Black et al., 2017). In the same vein, research on psychotherapy practice suggests that when practitioners are willing to seek client feedback and approach this feedback in a non-defensive way, this will contribute to establishing a stronger WA (Timulak & Keogh, 2017). Using client feedback can support therapists to be more empathic and enable them to invest in the process of developing a strong WA more quickly (Winkeljohn Black et al., 2017).

Parallel to these findings in the field of psychotherapy, the idea developed that the use of direct client feedback should also be an integral part of social work training and professional development. Direct client feedback has the potential to enable social workers to assess the quality of the WA with their clients. It can be implemented in an attempt to ameliorate how clients experience social work processes, the relationship with practitioners and the outcome of interventions (Allen et al., 2016). Chisholm and Sheldon (2011) stress that obtaining client feedback should be tailored to the specificity of the professional context, taking in to account the perceived capacity and willingness of a particular group of clients to engage in a particular form of feedback process. There are several tools that can be used to obtain client feedback, ranging from standardized questionnaires to qualitative interviews, collaborative conversations, story-telling, sculpting and other art forms. For the context of social work in the field of mental health, an evidence-based guide was developed in which two specific approaches are advocated: the use of a questionnaire and gathering feedback through collaborative conversations (Allen et al., 2016).

Drawing on this guide, the present research sought to combine both approaches: scoring a standardized questionnaire (WAMC-I) and then engaging in a collaborative conversation regarding the differences and similarities in these scores. In doing so, practitioners and clients can discuss all relevant items that impact the quality of the WA in a mandated context in a structured and standardized manner. The WAMC-I was initially developed to measure the quality of the WA between practitioners and clients in the Dutch context of community supervision. This instrument is the result of a longitudinal study in the Dutch probation service (Menger, 2018). The researchers used previously developed questionnaires to create the aforementioned new theoretical model of characteristics that determine the quality of the WA (Menger, 2018). Hence, the WAMC-I measures the characteristics of the WA in a mandated context most predictive for its quality. These characteristics are operationalized in 19 statements that can be answered on a 5-point Likert-scale. There are two versions of the WAMC-I, one for professionals and one for clients. The two versions mirror the same statements. For more details on the structure, the different items and validity of the WAMC-I as a measuring instrument, we refer to a recent publication in the *European Journal of Probation* (Boxstaens & Depauw, 2020).

Methodology

Research questions

As explained before, it seems beneficiary for the effectiveness of their work when practitioners and clients engage in a joint reflection process using a standardized feedback instrument. Drawing on these findings, I analyze whether the WAMC-I could also be used as a standardized tool for joint reflection between justice assistants and their clients. The main research question in the present study is: how do justice assistants and clients perceive the potential of the WAMC-I as a professional tool for joint reflection on their WA?

Participants

In this study the participants are dyads of justice assistants and clients within the 14 Flemish Houses of Justice. Dyads were selected on the basis of four criteria: 1) within the broader field of community supervision, the focus lies on *probation* as it is the most used alternative to imprisonment that is applied in Flanders. Hence, all dyads in this study consist of clients under a probation mandate and justice assistants who are following up on this mandate; 2) all selected dyads are *formed recently*, which means that in all cases justice assistants and their clients had minimum one and maximum 4 one-on-one meetings. In other words, in all cases justice assistants and clients were in the phase of establishing their WA; 3) in an attempt to avoid a possible bias, justice assistants could participate in the research in *maximum two dyads*; 4) dyads from all 14 Flemish Houses of Justice were included in the research sample.

Based on these criteria, 130 dyads were selected and asked to explore the use of the WAMC-I as a professional tool for joint reflection. Eventually, 65 dyads agreed to participate in the study, which means that the response ratio was exactly 50%.

Design

To answer the aforementioned research question, a research design was developed in three layers. To introduce the WAMC-I to practitioners engaged in probation, five regional kick-off meetings were organized in which the purpose of the study was explained and potential respondents were invited to ask questions. After this information exchange, the original Dutch version of the WAMC-I (Menger, 2018) was introduced. Participants were asked to formulate comments on the lay out, contents and usability of the WAMC-I

as a tool for practice. Based on the recurring remarks made by justice assistants in the kick-off meetings, a Flemish version of the WAMC-I was developed.

In a second phase, the 65 practitioners that agreed to participate in the study received the two versions (one for the client, one for themselves) of the WAMC-I and a limited manual with suggestions on how to use the instrument. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, only general instructions were provided on how to prepare for the meeting in which the instrument would be used. Next to the manual, two instruction videos were provided: one for the practitioner and one for the client. First and foremost, clients and justice assistants were informed that their scores on the WAMC-I were not considered as research data and would not be recorded by the researcher. That way, the exploration of the WAMC-I as a tool for practice was emphasized. Secondly, practitioners were explicitly asked to discuss what to do with the filled out questionnaires after the meeting (e.g. shred the forms, keep them in the case file, let clients take their version home, etc.). After viewing the instruction video, ensuring that the aim of the intervention was clear to both parties and filling out the WAMC-I separately, justice assistants and clients were asked to compare their scores on all items of the instrument and discuss possible similarities and differences. Within a week after the intervention with the WAMC-I, practitioners and clients were contacted by phone for a structured interview. The purpose of this phone interview was to get an idea on how the process of using the WAMC-I as a tool for joint-reflection took place and to capture respondents first reactions on the perceived relevance and usability of the tool. The fact that a phone interview would take place was already announced in the instruction manual and video. Practitioners were asked whether they could provide information on the best possible timing to contact their clients. In most cases call appointments were made to ensure that respondents were contacted at a suitable time. In total, 38 justice assistants and 28 clients were successfully interviewed.

In the phone interviews immediately after the intervention first impressions were captured. However, in order to obtain more information on the perceived relevance and usability of the WAMC-I, a final layer of the research design consists of semi-structured interviews. To limit the impact on the time schedule of respondents, interviews were planned following a meeting at the involved Houses of Justice. In total, 15 justice assistants and 10 clients were interviewed.

Analyses

The feedback on the original Dutch version of the WAMC-I was noted during five regional kick-off meetings, bundled in a 4-page document and used to develop a Flemish version of the WAMC-I. It is important to note that no fundamental changes were made with regard to the contents of the 19 items that operationalize the theoretical framework of the WA as designed by Menger (2018). However, the Flemish version of the WAMC-I

differs from the original version when it comes to the language that is used. Some words and expressions used in the Netherlands are not applicable in Flanders and therefore were translated to the Flemish context.

All phone interviews with practitioners and clients were recorded through Skype. Quantitative data (e.g. time needed for filling out the WAMC-I, time needed to discuss the WAMC-I, etc.) were processed in SPSS, qualitative data from phone and in-depth interviews were transcribed, uploaded, coded and analyzed with Nvivo 12 software. For the qualitative analyses the Framework Approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) was used.

Findings

Data gathered in semi-structured in-depth interviews with practitioners and clients clearly show initial skepticism about using the WAMC-I as a tool for practice. This skepticism targets both engaging in a collaborative conversation, as well as the concept of the WA itself.

Initial skepticism about engaging in a collaborative conversation on the WA

The use of the WAMC-I as a tool for joint reflection on the WA was initially questioned by justice assistants. The idea to engage in a collaborative conversation with their clients was not welcomed, certainly in the early stage of the research project. Some practitioners openly resisted to the use of the instrument by calling an intervention with the WAMC-I unnatural or awkward. By this they meant two things. First of all they opposed to the idea of engaging in a joint reflection process regarding the WA with their clients because they are not used to do this and did not feel like it should be a part of their job.

For me it was very awkward. We are used to asking questions ourselves, not to being questioned by clients. I never ask myself: what does he [the client] think of me [Justice Assistant 5].

I thought it was pretty bizarre. We are not used to doing that. I found it strange and maybe even a little funny to fill out a sort of survey together with a client [Justice Assistant 9].

Secondly, practitioners saw an intervention with the WAMC-I as unnatural because of the fact that they are not accustomed to utilizing standardized instruments in practice. Their main concern was whether a complex construct as the WA in a mandated context can be captured in a standardized tool.

It felt a bit unnatural. It made the conversation feel very structured and very limited, like, it really should be about that [the WA] now [Justice Assistant 30].

To me, engaging in a conversation with my client using this instrument felt fake, it felt... too forced. I don't want to be in a straightjacket. I do not feel comfortable with the fact that the way I engage in a conversation with my client is standardized. I don't need an instrument to do that [Justice Assistant 4].

Initial skepticism about the concept of the working alliance

Analyses show that the initial skepticism about using a standardized instrument is intertwined with skepticism about the concept of the WA. In general, practitioners were not familiar with the concept of the WA prior to the research. Initially, justice assistants consistently used the word «relationship». Moreover, respondents seemed to associate the WA primarily with the traditional concept of the professional relationship and not with the pan-theoretical concept introduced by Bordin (1979). A possible explanation for this could be that in their education most practitioners were particularly confronted with the classic Rogerian paradigm of the professional relationship which emphasizes the role of the empathic, warm and genuine professional in building that relationship (Rogers, 1957). Initially, practitioners did not consider the goals of supervision and the tasks that need to be carried out to reach those goals a part of the WA. They saw goals and tasks as primarily linked to the legal mandate that is constituted by the conditions imposed on the client and therefore as something external to the WA. In the beginning of the research project, this interpretation led to a lot of skepticism towards the concept of the WA in general. However, after explaining the theoretical model of the WA in a mandated context (Menger, 2018), practitioners saw the use of the concept as an added value in describing their professional relationship with clients in community supervision. Especially the idea that the goals and tasks in supervision, which are linked to a set of conditions that clients need to comply with, determine the nature of the bond that needs to be developed, convinced justice assistants that the WA is a relevant concept in their field. Moreover, in this perspective, justice assistants consider a good quality WA to be a necessary prerequisite for a successful supervision process. The interview data were further analyzed using the four core characteristics of the WA in a mandated context as an analytical framework. For clients, *bond and trust* appeared to be a very important characteristic of the WA with their justice assistant. Regardless of the mandated context, some clients report that they have developed outright trust in their justice assistant. This results in complete openness about eventual problems, also when it concerns a possible breach of conditions.

Well, I first had to get to know my assistant, so in conversations I didn't really go deep. But now, I come in and I literally tell her [the justice assistant] everything. She has to go into my life anyway. Besides, I also come here to get things off my chest [Client 1].

If things go well, they go well off course. And if things go wrong, well yeah, I tell her [the justice assistant] that too. You don't have to lie about it or keep it to yourself. She'll find out anyway [Client 3].

Other clients are more cautious and state that they would not disclose information that could lead to possible revocation of the probation measure. However, clients feel safe enough to address personal problems that don't reflect directly on the conditions.

Yes, I trust my justice assistant. I regularly talk about private things like the relationship with my girlfriend and so on. If I didn't feel I could trust her, I wouldn't do that, would I? No, no, she gets to know very much about me [laughs] [Client 7].

Should I do something illegal again or something that is in breach of my conditions, then I don't know whether I would immediately say this to my justice assistant. I think I would be scared to say it because then she has to rapport it [Client 10].

From their perspective, practitioners are very aware of the dual professional role they need to balance and the difficulties this entails regarding the element of trust. The interview data clarify that justice assistants interpret the concept of trust in various ways. Some claim that building a trusting relationship is impossible in a mandated context. They perceive trust as something absolute that can only be viewed as a dichotomous concept: it is there or it is not. Translated to the WA with their clients, this means that the mandated context refrains them from providing 100% trust. Moreover, practitioners who take this position state that their dual role makes it impossible to expect that clients would fully trust them, therefore rendering it impossible to establish a trusting relationship. Needless to say that these respondents remain very critical towards the use of the word trust as a characteristic of the WA in a mandated context in general and the items relating to bond and trust in the WAMC-I in particular.

To be honest, I don't think it is appropriate to use the word trust. I don't need to trust my clients. They tell me their story and whether this is true or false, that is their choice. It doesn't really matter and it doesn't really say anything about the WA you have. Off course it is nice when someone is open and honest, but in our line of work it would be very naïve to expect this. When it comes to trust: I sometimes don't even trust my friends, why should I trust my clients [Justice Assistant 9].

Trust is not really important. If they [clients] comply with the imposed conditions, than that is sufficient [Justice Assistant 3].

However, other practitioners in our sample adopt a more lenient interpretation of trust. They claim that a certain amount of trust or «basic trust» is absolutely necessary for a successful and meaningful supervision process. Clients should feel free and safe enough to discuss issues and problems they encounter, certainly when these issues are connected to the conditions that form the legal mandate that legitimizes community supervision.

In a mandated context, trust can be regarded as treating people with respect and being treated by them in the same way. It means that people are open and cooperative to a certain extent, certainly when it comes to the conditions: being present, notify when you can't make it, etcetera. But I don't think you can talk about trust in a really deep sense [Justice Assistant 2].

I do think a certain amount of trust is important. Otherwise clients wouldn't tell anything because they would always be suspicious towards me. To me mutual trust is important to make discussions as open as possible, so that clients can feel free to talk about anything they want [Justice Assistant 5].

In order to establish this basic trust within the WA with their clients, practitioners emphasize the paramount importance of role clarification in the beginning of and throughout the supervision process. This means that it is absolutely necessary to be clear about the boundaries of confidentiality and the obligation when and how to rapport, to show respect and to be reliable.

Being clear about my role as a justice assistant is essential, everything starts from there [Justice Assistant 14].

Role clarification is very important. It's not always easy to talk about because it can sometimes be pretty boring [laughs]. But explaining what I do and don't do, what the probation commission does, what the imposed conditions are, when and how I have to write a rapport, etcetera. is something I always do in the beginning and throughout the probation process [Justice Assistant 10].

Therefore, the characteristic of bond and trust seems to be intertwined with another characteristic of the WA in a mandated context, namely *clarity of rules and regulations*. The interview data show that practitioners not only find it important to explain their professional role in the supervision process but also want to clarify the legal mandate (the imposed conditions) and the role of the mandating authority (in this case the probation commission). The latter is deemed important to create a condition in which justice assistants can effectively balance their dual role.

Clients confirm that receiving clear information on rules and regulations is very important. When they are first confronted with community supervision, a lot of clients don't really know what they can expect. Being correctly informed by their justice assistant is often considered to be a first step in establishing a good quality WA.

In the beginning she [Justice assistant] explained everything very clearly. That was important because it was the first time for me. She explained what my conditions were, so I immediately knew the five conditions I need to comply with very well. This made it easier for me and was the beginning of a good relationship [Client 5].

In some cases, clients have questions about or openly oppose the conditions they have to fulfil. This relates to *reactance*, a third characteristic of the WA in a mandated context. Practitioners report that client's non-compliance with imposed conditions or lies about elements involved in the legal mandate mostly reflect negatively on the quality of the WA. From the clients point of view, the quality of the WA can be negatively influenced if the justice assistant is considered to be judgmental or unfair or when they feel there is a discrepancy between the practitioners discourse and her or his actions. Clients can

also experience difficulties in coping with the fact that certain elements in their lives are subject to control. In other words, clients can show reactance when they feel their personal autonomy is being reduced during the supervision process. Therefore it is important to try and develop *shared goals and tasks*, which refers to a fourth characteristic of the WA in a mandated context. Clients and practitioners state that the goals of supervision are largely predetermined by the legal mandate. The general goal of community supervision can be described as non-recidivism or desistance from crime and in order to reach this goal, certain sub-goals defined as conditions have to be achieved. Practitioners state that motivating their clients to comply with the imposed conditions is an important part of their job. That way, goals that were initially predetermined by a mandating authority can evolve into shared goals. Practitioners emphasize that using the WAMC-I can help to keep the focus on the goals and tasks within the supervision process. More specifically, they report that scoring and discussing the items related to this characteristic of the WA in a mandated context can help to check whether there actually is an agreement on the important goals and tasks that need to be fulfilled.

Facilitating feedback and positively influencing the working alliance

After they had actually used the instrument, practitioners still mentioned a certain uneasiness in using the instrument for the first time, but above all commented positively on their experience.

Well, initially I had my concerns: does it really make sense to use this instrument? But when discussing all items in the instrument you also talk about things that seem self-evident, but actually might not be in retrospect. I found it useful because we talked about things that would not be subject of a conversation normally [Justice Assistant 20].

I found it interesting to hear the client's opinion and although I feared socially desirable answers, I think we both filled in the instrument in an honest way. I found it useful because we learned something that we can use in the future, something the client himself had indicated, so yes, I found it relevant [Justice Assistant 19].

Practitioners involved in the study claim that the WAMC-I facilitates a collaborative conversation on all aspects of the WA. The instrument not only helps to initiate a conversation, but also structures it as most dyads used the WAMC-I as a sort of topic list, making sure that all topics were covered. Practitioners claim that without the WAMC-I they would maybe address some items of the WA in a meeting with a client, but never all of them.

I think it is easier to work with this instrument then to just start talking about the WA, for me, but also for clients. You can just score the different items and then talk about your score. It seems to me that it is easier to use the instrument than to try and find your own words [Justice Assistant 5].

The WA is a broad concept. Sure, I talk about certain element of this relationship, but never about all of them. When you use the instrument, you can make sure to cover all items of the WA [Justice Assistant 3].

The interviews with clients also show a positive image when it comes to their assessment of the perceived relevance of using the WAMC-I as a feedback instrument. Clients report a positive experience and state that they felt free to score and discuss the different items of the WAMC-I. Clients appreciate the possibility to express how they feel about the WA with their justice assistant.

Filling out that survey and talking about the different questions wasn't so bad. My justice assistant and I agreed on many of the questions and that was nice. I didn't find it difficult all [Client 6].

For me it was new, but actually, I think this should happen more. I felt like I could be honest and I think that she was too. It made me think and sometimes I was in doubt about my answer, but then it was good that I could talk to X [justice assistant] about it [Client 7].

As to the question when the use of the WAMC-I is most relevant, a dichotomy seems to develop amongst the respondents in our sample: a group of practitioners and clients advocates the use of the WAMC-I in cases where the supervision process is difficult and the quality of the WA is perceived as poor. Respondents argue that discussing the different items in the WAMC-I could help to clarify each other's position and that they expect this to have a positive effect on the WA.

I think it might be more difficult to use the instrument in a case with a client that shows more reactance. This wasn't the case now and I still felt awkward. I think that by using the instrument, you could reveal problematic issues. However, in the end you might get more out of it by uncovering these issues and figuring out how to tackle them. In these situations you might get more out of using the WAMC-I. So yeah, maybe it makes more sense to use the instrument in situations where you have a difficult WA with a client [Justice Assistant 22].

It might be a good idea to use the instrument particularly in cases where there are difficulties. That way, it would become clear where the problems lie and where the client or myself could try to make changes. This could have positive outcome for the future, you could work with that [Justice Assistant 29, own translation].

However, other respondents argue that the use of the WAMC-I should be reserved for cases in which the supervision process goes relatively well and the quality of the WA is good. These respondents claim that using the WAMC-I in a situation that is already difficult would probably work adversely.

In my opinion it [using the WAMC-I] would be more difficult with more problematic clients. I can imagine that it would be a totally different conversation and maybe they won't be prepared to participate [Justice Assistant 11].

I think that when clients show a lot of reactance, who really have difficulties just coming here, who don't agree with their sentence, don't agree with the conditions, then you have to put a lot of energy into just trying to get them to comply with their conditions. To then talk about the WA would be more sensitive and more difficult, also for me [Justice Assistant 1].

Discussion

First and foremost, the exploratory nature of the present study needs to be emphasized. Since research on the WA in a mandated context is scarce, expanding the research agenda on this topic is necessary. Utilizing the WAMC-I as a measurement instrument as well as a tool for joint reflection on the WA in a mandated context has rich potential for further research. For example, it would be worthwhile to see whether a positive effect of the WAMC-I on the quality of the WA can be demonstrated in quantitative research. Secondly, the link between the outcome measures of the WAMC-I and the outcomes of community supervision deserves additional research attention. Earlier studies on the association between the quality of the WA and recidivism have reported contradictory findings and showed subsequent methodological flaws (Wild, 2011; DeLude et al., 2012; Hart & Collins, 2014). Thirdly, it seems worthwhile to explore the added value of the concept of the WA and the use of the WAMC-I in other fields of social work, certainly in those areas where practice is confronted with involuntary clients who are formally or informally coerced, pressured or constraint to enter social services (e.g. psychiatry, drug treatment programs, child protection services, etc.).

A methodological remark regards a possible bias in the research sample of the present study. As described earlier, 130 dyads of respondents were initially selected and eventually 65 dyads agreed to take part in the study. The large part of the non-response can be attributed to the refusal of clients to participate. Although it was impossible to uncover the actual reason for this non-response, the hypothesis rose that our sample shows an overrepresentation of dyads that are characterized by a WA of good quality, which could lead to a positive bias in our findings. In other words, the overriding support for the concept of the WA in a mandated context and the perceived usability and relevance for the WAMC-I as a tool for joint reflection could be overestimated based on our current data.

This study clarifies that the concept of the WA is not well known by justice assistants. This is consistent with earlier research on community supervision that revealed that also in this field bond, goals and tasks appear to be important aspects of practice, but are not seen as characteristics of the same concept that are inextricably linked and are certainly not labeled as WA (McNeill, 2006). The practitioners in our sample initially associated WA specifically with the characteristic of bond and trust, not taking into account the importance of other characteristics as equally important parts of the WA in a mandated context. However, when thoroughly explained, practitioners consider the WA as a relevant concept

in their field and even as a necessary prerequisite for a successful supervision process. In general, this study shows that justice assistants support Mengers (2018) adaptation of the pan-theoretical concept of the WA (Bordin, 1979), integrating earlier adjustments regarding the dual role of practitioners in a mandated context (Skeem et al., 2007) and explicitly stressing the importance of clarity of rules and regulations (Trotter, 2015; Manchak, Skeem, & Rook, 2014) and the possible effect of reactance (Rooney, 1992) as a negative characteristic of the WA.

Exploring the use of the WAMC-I in Flemish community supervision has revealed that the use of the instrument to give feedback on the WA is feasible for both practitioners and clients. Using the WAMC-I facilitates a collaborative conversation on the quality of the WA. The instrument seems tailored to the involved professionals and clients and is largely in accordance with the capacities of the particular client group, which are two important recommendations for approaching client feedback (Chisholm & Sheldon, 2011; Allen et al., 2016). However, in some cases, especially when there are language issues (e.g. illiteracy) practitioners should pay extra attention to ensure clients understand the different items of the WAMC-I to a full extent. In these cases the communication style can be adapted or communication aids (e.g. first-language interpretation) may be necessary. Because of the exploratory nature of the present study, suggestions on how to use the WAMC-I were intentionally kept minimal. Based on the current findings a more detailed manual can be developed and, taking into account the results of ongoing and future research, a methodical framework needs to be refined.

A main research question addressed the perceived relevance of the WAMC-I as a professional tool for joint reflection. The data show that practitioners initially perceived the use of the WAMC-I as unnatural. Justice assistants report that they are not accustomed to using standardized instruments in practice. This is in accordance with the results of recent research which claims that front-line supervision workers do not employ standardized tools systematically in deciding how to work with clients. Instead they exercise a relatively large amount of professional discretion and use strategies informed by experiential knowledge and social identities (Welsh, 2018). In addition, Perlinski et al. (2012) have shown that social workers do not consider creating relationships with their clients as a professional skill, but highlight a general brotherly feeling and sensitivity. These findings help explain the initial reluctance of justice assistants to using a standardized instrument in practice. However, not only the use of an instrument was seen as unnatural. Practitioners initially also opposed to the idea of engaging in a process of joint reflection with their clients. This can be linked to a certain uneasiness that practitioners experience reversing the usual power dynamic and information flow from practitioner to client (Allen et al., 2016). Moreover, the organizational culture of the Flemish Houses of Justice does not prioritize reflection on practice in general due to high caseloads and corresponding time issues (Boxstaens & Bauwens, 2013), rendering a successful implementation of structured and regular joint reflection processes difficult.

Clients that participated in the present study were positive about engaging in a joint feedback session using the WAMC-I. They valued the possibility to express their opinion on the WA with their justice assistant and felt free to discuss the different items of the WAMC-I in an honest and open way. However, research in the field of psychotherapy has shown that clients may be reluctant to be critical towards a practitioner and therefore provide feedback they consider to be socially desirable (Timulak & Keogh, 2017). If this is the case in a voluntary setting, possible social desirability certainly has to be taken into account in a mandated context. Research on community supervision practice indicates that all clients have the possibility to develop a good quality WA with the involved practitioner (Wild, 2011). The findings in the present study suggest that when clients feel a sufficient amount of trust has been established, they are prepared to be open and honest and share delicate, maybe even problematic personal information. Nevertheless, the question remains whether clients will display an even amount of openness in situations where basic trust is lacking. To clarify what we understand as a realistic amount of trust, we refer to Smith (2004) who differentiates between «confidence» and «trust» as two distinct aspects of service provision and how this is perceived by clients. The concept of confidence applies to how we perceive abstract systems, while the concept of trust «characterizes our attitude to social exchanges that rely on moral motivation and that have moral consequences» (Smith, 2004, p. 7). In order to understand the realistic amount of trust between worker and client (Menger, 2018) that is necessary to form a bond, both confidence and trust have to be taken into account. It has been argued that in community supervision practice, the WA between justice assistants and their clients should actually be considered as a triad in which the mandating authority (e.g. probation commission) is the third party (Klockars, 1972; Blay & Boxstaens, 2018). The concept of confidence can be used to characterize how the abstract system of community supervision, embodied by the mandating authority, is perceived by clients. The concept of trust relates to the WA between practitioner and client and arises from the direct interaction between both. Whether a client develops confidence in the system of community supervision depends on indications that community supervision is well designed for its purpose and that practitioners are seen as technically competent for the job. However, whether a client develops trust in the practitioner is related to the latter's moral competences, which entails that practitioners show respect, honesty, optimism and care. Smith (2004) argues that both confidence and trust are necessary to adequately address client's need for effective practice and moral competence.

A key finding of the present study regards respondent's opinions on when to use the WAMC-I for joint reflection: some respondents advocate bringing in the WAMC-I into situations where the supervision process is difficult, others argue that the instrument should only be used in situations where the supervision process goes relatively well. In theory, organizing feedback sessions should highlight discrepancies between the current and desired quality of the WA. This way expectations of both clients and practitioners can

be clarified and, if accepted, the feedback can lead to an improvement of the WA (Winkeljohn Black et al., 2017). Research in the field of psychotherapy shows that in cases where treatment is progressing well, feedback can explicitly confirm what is implicitly thought or sensed. This can lead to increased involvement and further enhance the quality of the WA (Rise et al., 2012). On the other hand, other studies demonstrate that implementing joint feedback sessions in situations where treatment is difficult can also be beneficiary for the quality of the WA, especially when the involved parties are open to feedback (Lambert & Shimokawa, 2011; Winkeljohn Black et al., 2017). Hence, based on literature, there is no reason to assume that the use of the WAMC-I should be preserved for situations where the supervision process goes well, neither should utilizing the instrument be limited to difficult situations. Further research is needed to fully understand underlying mechanisms of change and clarify whether there are situations in which using the WAMC-I is more relevant.

Conclusion

The findings in the present study show that the WAMC-I can be used as a tool for joint reflection on the WA in a mandated context and that respondents consider the instrument and its underlying theoretical framework to have an added value for community supervision practice. This study is supportive of the hypothesis that the quality of the WA can be positively influenced by using a standardized feedback instrument, however, these promising results derived from exploratory qualitative research deserve to be followed up by future research incorporating mixed-methodological frameworks. The relevance of the WA for social work practice in general and social work under judicial mandate in particular should be highlighted. This is especially important in an era where policy, practice and research have predominantly focused on the development of effective and efficient interventions and the WA has received too little attention in accordance to its paramount importance for social work practice.

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