



Working in the Public Sector

Introduction to the Thematic Issue

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Work in the public sector has been changing dramatically in recent decades. Reforms aimed at increasing the efficiency of public services have been extensive in the Nordic countries and elsewhere since the 1980s. The reforms and changes have to a large extent been associated with so-called New Public Management (NPM) principles, emphasizing the market as a central coordination mechanism. Consequently, public institutions have been restructured, their services are standardized and commodified, and market-like relationships between them have been created. In order to create markets and transform citizens into customers on a market, outsourcing and privatization have been stimulated (Blomqvist & Rothstein 2000, Busch et al. 2005, Christensen & Lægheid 2007, Greve 2003). At the same time, traditional Weberian bureaucratic principles are still viable and even enhanced within the sector, for instance, as a consequence of the use of contracts as a means of managing public organizations (Greve 2008). Lately, large reforms aimed at centralized coordination of different service providers, such as the integration of the Norwegian welfare administration, have been labeled post-NPM reforms by some researchers. The implication of all these parallel tendencies is that the institutional and organizational landscape surrounding the work situations of employees in the public sector have become increasingly complex, some call them hybrid, putting a variety of conflicting pressures on the performance of work within the sector (Christensen & Lægheid 2011, Hasselbladh et al. 2008).

In this special issue, we explore some of the consequences of these structural and normative changes on the work of public sector employees in different sectors and contexts.

The role and character of the public sector in the Nordic countries

The public sector plays a special role in the Nordic welfare state. It is connected with a commitment to principles of universalism in relation to social security and publicly funded services in the core areas of education, health, and care (Rostgaard 2002). This implies, among other things, that care for the elderly and young children is perceived as the state's responsibility rather than the family's. This constitutes an important precondition for women in the Nordic countries having the highest labor force participation compared with other western countries (www.oecd.org.els.emp). Another implication is that the public sector is quite large in relation to the overall economy and constitutes a large part of the labor market.



Along with the advance of the welfare state, and simultaneously with its modernization, a number of new welfare professions have developed, which provide the framework for professional identification and ethics. New professions such as pedagogues, social workers, physiotherapists, social care assistants, and auxiliary nurses join the existing ones like nurses, teachers, psychologists, and physicians. These new professions have formed the framework for professionalization of work, which was previously unpaid work belonging to the reproductive sphere. Women's entry into the labor market has been a prerequisite for the growth of these professions, and these welfare professions have also become very dominated by women (Emerek and Holt 2008, Gonäs & Karlsson 2006).

It is important to note that NPM has taken very different forms in different countries. In the Nordic countries, we often speak of a “soft” model of NPM compared with countries like the UK and the USA. It is a “negotiated modernization,” where there have been local adaptations and where the social partners through participation have gained influence. And here professionalization and professional development has been a key element (Hjort 2001, 2005). At the same time, NPM includes an attempt to challenge the professions' monopoly to assess, what is good care, good service, good teaching, by installing rational management models (Clarke & Newman 1997, Hood 1991). The professionals are perceived as a part of the problem that NPM was created to solve—namely that the public sector is growing, is considered bureaucratic and inefficient. Taking departure in an “economic man” philosophy, they are seen as utility-maximizing groups that simply seek to secure their own interests. The Nordic variant of NPM is therefore paradoxical: on the one hand new professionalism is cultivated and on the other hand its autonomy is defied, so tensions and contradictions in working life should be expected (Dahl & Rasmussen 2012, Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2012).

Nordic working life research on the public sector has mainly had its focus on the work of the so-called welfare professions and the ramifications of the different reforms. Thus, many studies deal specifically with the consequences of these contradictory developments in various professions and disciplines and concerns consequences for identity and professionalism, for working conditions, stress and emotional strain.

Research on the consequences of modernization of public sector in the Nordic countries

Part of the Nordic research takes departure in the observation of a clash of rationales as resulting from the introduction of principles of NPM: an economic rationale versus a professional rationale. Consequently, a main theme for the research on care work is exactly the contradictions between economic rationality and the rationality of care (Dybbroe 2006, Eliasson 1992, Wærness 1984). Several studies point to self-intensification as a typical consequence of professionals' attempts to reconcile their own professional requirements with the framework provided by the system (Rasmussen 2004). Other studies point out the emotional pressure associated with not being able to perform work of a decent quality (Liebst & Monrad 2008, Liveng 2006). Clashes between different rationales are also the focus of several studies of social workers in job centers and other parts of the social and unemployment system. They underline how recent changes create ethical dilemmas and cross-pressures for the professionals, and—as the

studies on care work—they also show how the social workers try to manage their work in order to give room for what they perceive as the core of their work (Baadsgaard et al. 2012).

Other parts of the Nordic research focus on the different forms of standardization that are increasingly used to manage and organize the work. The term New-Taylorism is even applied when speaking of the rationalization of elderly care, referring to the meticulous control of time and work that bears clear resemblances to Scientific Management. Fragmentation of work and the potential undermining of its meaningfulness is an important research area (see, e.g., Dybbroe 2008, Kamp 2011, 2012, Tufte 2011). Others point to how certain types of public services such as home care, in fact, are so context sensitive and unpredictable that standardization does not make sense, the point being that the administrative frameworks do not function. Under the surface, another world of work is unfolded. Considerable additional work is required to make the system work in spite of the administrative frameworks (e.g., Szebehely 2006, Vabø 2007). In consequence, some researchers point to the power dynamics in this sector and conceive of this extra work or hidden services as resistance or misbehavior (Kirchhoff & Karlsson 2013, Kirchhoff 2010).

Another aspect of standardization is the normative effect. Standards do not only have impact on the practical work organization, they also define and redefine the professional universe, its language, and key concepts. Standards confine the boundaries of this universe and include and exclude some aspects, leaving the excluded muted and invisible. This has especially been studied in care work. For example, research done on elderly care shows how certain parts of care work—e.g., parts addressing suffering pain and decay—are left out (Dahl 2005).

Gender perspectives on the welfare professions also play an important role. It is well documented that many of the jobs in female-dominated public sectors are poorly paid when judged against comparable jobs in male sectors (Deding & Larsen 2008). These inequalities do of course not have a simple explanation. But as much Nordic feminist research points out, the problem of obtaining recognition of welfare professions' work as "real work" is at the core of understanding the problems concerning both wage and working conditions more broadly (Christensen 2004, Wærness 1984). This is especially relevant when discussing different types of care work such as child and elderly care, but also applies to, e.g., cleaning and cooking. Some research also includes this lack of recognition in a broader societal context as an explanation of how this kind of work is being rationalized, disregarding its relational nature (as explained above), and as a supplementary explanation of the abundance of sickness absence and stress (Dahl 2009, Gleerup 2009).

From a gender perspective, research also points out how the process of professionalization does not work neutrally. The work of many welfare professions is less based on a body of formal knowledge, but to a larger extent defined through practice-based knowledge. It is often described as holistic work, involving mind, hands, and heart in carrying out the task. However, as several researchers show, attempts to rationalize work increasingly render competencies deemed maternal or female invisible and exclude them as not being part of "the professional" (Amble & Gjerding 2003, Fejes 2012, Rasmussen 2004).

Most work in the public sector is service work, which involves working in direct contact with clients or citizens (Korczynski & Macdonald 2009). Since Lipsky's classic



study of “street-level bureaucracy,” the relation between service worker and client must inevitably be called into question and problematized (Lipsky 1980). And certainly with Hochschild’s seminal work, *The Managed Heart* (Hochschild 1983), the concept of emotional labor has also been used in order to grasp how employees deal with dilemmas and contradictions in the public sector. Considering the ongoing changes in public sector work, it becomes particularly interesting how the changing role of the client/citizen affects the relation to the professional. As explained above, NPM implies an attempt to position the citizen as a consumer who actively chooses between different services on a market. But also other developments potentially change the relations between professionals and clients. The concept of “citizen-centered service” has great impact in all parts of the Nordic public sector, particularly in the social and health sectors. One of the implications is that the position and the identity of the professionals are changing. While citizens are given the responsibility for their own recovery or rehabilitation, the professionals’ role is to facilitate and educate them to do so (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2012, Kjær & Reff Pedersen 2010). So, the relation between professionals and clients is clearly a relevant focus for working life studies, but still open for research.

Finally, another scarcely researched area is the implications of new forms of management in the public sector. NPM is not only about different forms of restructuring in order to establish market-like conditions but also about introducing management practices, which takes inspiration from the private sector. With the increasing focus on governance, there is a growing interest in strategic management and professionalization of management. The question is what happens when leaders at various levels are encouraged to replace their professional identity with a leader identity. What are the consequences for social relations and the ambivalence they experience themselves? These are important questions that only few researchers have addressed (see, however, Hansen & Vøxted 2012, Newman 2005, Rasmussen 2012).

Concluding remarks

Nordic working life research in the public sector has until now had its strength in the broad areas of welfare provision: elderly care, child care, health and education; with research in care work being the most well-established field. However, other types of work are attracting research interest. For example, studies of police officers, prison guards, and the army are evolving (e.g., Ødegaard 2011).

Moreover, the term public sector is not a stable concept (Newman & Clarke 2009). Observing current societal development, what we see is the upcoming of different types of hybrid organizations, blurring the boundaries between state, market, and civil society. Outsourcing, subcontracting, new forms of public–private partnership and increased use of voluntary work contribute to this development and raise new questions to working life studies.

The contributions of this special issue

This special issue consists of five articles, which all—although in different ways—deepen our understanding of the problematics outlined above.

The first two articles primarily take their departure in “the clash of rationales”—illuminating the complex consequences for different professional groups. In the article “Nursing in times of neoliberal change: an ethnographic study of nurses’ experiences of work intensification,” Rebecca Selberg studies how recent changes in the work situations of nurses within the Swedish hospital sector, associated with NPM and neoliberal transformation of the welfare state, have increased the intensification of the work load of nurses, emphasizing economic and bureaucratic rationality at the cost of the rationality of care. She, however, also points out how the same reforms also result in opportunities to render visible and expand the nursing field in relation to, among others, the medical profession. Further, she identifies how the NPM reforms challenge the authority of the professions and thereby strengthen the position of clients and patients.

The next article “Inauthenticity at work: Moral conflicts in market-oriented welfare organizations,” Elin Thunman relates the documented symptoms of increasing mental exhaustion among European employees, especially women working in public service work, to particular changes in the work situation of welfare workers. She argues that the implementation of NPM steering mechanisms, such as customer-oriented management in welfare organization, constitutes inauthentic work situations causing experiences of moral conflicts among the individual service providers, challenging their sense of personal integrity. In the article, the sense of inauthentic work situations and moral conflicts is explored through case studies of three public workplaces, an employment office, a compulsory school, and an elderly care institution.

Customer relations in public service work and the different problems that evolve around managing these relations is the focus of the third article “Looking neat on the street. Aesthetic labor in public parking patrol.” Dorte Boesby Dahl analyses how managers of a Danish parking patrol department use aesthetics as a deliberate measure in order to promote diversity and health and safety among the employees within the organization. The paper contributes to the discourse on aesthetic labor, by making the discourse that primarily has been developed by studying work in private sector companies, relevant for work in public service enterprises. Aesthetic labor in the private sector has primarily been associated with the use of the employee’s looks and appearances for commercial purposes as well as a basis for discrimination. Boesby Dahl demonstrates how the category of aesthetic labor can be applied to capture a richer and more nuanced range of management measures.

“Unnoticed professional competence in day care work” is the title of the article by Niels Warring, Annegrethe Ahrenkiel, Camilla Schmidt, Birger Steen Nielsen, and Finn Sommer. The article contributes to the debate on how standardization might redefine the boundaries of work. The authors discuss how everyday life in day care centers is dependent on professional skills and competence that can be seen as “unnoticed.” They present regulations in day care and the increasing importance of the “investment paradigm” seen in connection with the development of neoliberal governance and NPM. This development has been accompanied by an increased focus on formal learning activities in day care and a change in how professional competence is being conceived. The authors give empirical examples that show how unnoticed competence is imbedded in daily practice and presently is under pressure.

In the last article, Pernille Tufte rhetorically raises the question “Is there time enough?” Under this heading, she discusses how temporal framings affect and challenge care workers’ conceptions of care and their possibilities to perform care work. The



context is elderly care, where time and tasks have been standardized, and where recent economic cutbacks and time reductions have intensified the problems. Care workers are told by managers to leave out additional services as a way of adapting to time pressure. To care workers, maintaining the complexity of care work, this is a too simplistic notion. The article identifies three ways of relating to the concept of service division among the care workers. One is that it is possible to identify additional services and they can be left out, the other is that they can be identified but are indispensable, lastly that it is not possible to do any division of services. The paper concludes by discussing what constitutes a holistic and meaningful work performance for care workers in home care, focusing on both emotional and practical aspects of care work.

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