



Nordic Working Life Research – Continuity and Renewal¹

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ABSTRACT

Working life research does not have clear boundaries; however its focus is quite clear: Changes in working life and how these changes affect qualifications, health, occupations, innovation, the economy, identity, social orientation and culture. The density of working life research is quite high in the Nordic countries, and this research has always been involved in the development of the Nordic welfare societies in which the development of work has been one important factor. In this article working life research is presented in its historical contexts, emphasizing the welfare challenges to which the research has been related. The challenges and tensions related to the research are not presented as being simply internal to the research work, they also reflect challenges and tensions in working life and institutions that are supposed to support working life. Current controversies in working life research in the four Nordic countries will briefly be presented, and institutional challenges for the research in the four countries will be exemplified. Finally, the aims of the journal will be outlined.

Working life research – what are we talking about?

There is no exact demarcation line delimiting working life research. Working life research is knitted together with many other research areas and disciplines. However, working life research has a specific focus; namely changes in work for working people in all sectors of the economy and their effect on qualifications, health, occupation, innovation, the economy, identity, social orientation and culture. Working life plays a central role in human life and not merely as a means of putting bread on the table. Work is also a source of meaning, identity and creativity, and working life is a basic feature of the economic structure and the social relations of society. However, there is also another side of the coin, namely social exclusion, poor health, and work-life imbalance. Working conditions and the search for possible improvements in the quality of working life are the main objectives of working life research. The quality of working life involves all levels of society, and therefore working life research targets micro and macro levels of society: the work places, labor market organizations, institutions of the welfare state, trades or professions, branches of the economy or political and economic structures of society.

Two characteristics of working life research

The collaborative creation of knowledge

Most Nordic working life research is more or less closely related to sources of knowledge and practices outside academia. Action research has a stronghold in the field of working life research. Intervention studies are also quite common, aiming to guide or



inspire practitioners in the field. Studies of general trends in working life are often carried out in dialogue with the labor market parties and governmental institutions in the field. This collaborative creation of knowledge can be seen as both the strength and a weakness of working life research.

Interdisciplinarity

The quality of working life is multifaceted and cannot be understood within the boundaries of one discipline. Consequently working life research is often interdisciplinary, drawing on sociology, psychology, philosophy, economics, history, technical science, political science, occupational medicine and other disciplines.

Topics of working life research

We now turn to a presentation of the main topics dealt with in working life research. We will place them in a historical landscape, and reflect on how Nordic working life research has been influenced by the development of Nordic welfare societies, and what impact the research has had on those societies. It should be said that this is not the whole story about Nordic working life research. However, the story told in the following pages is not totally arbitrary either, because it is told by 11 Nordic working life researchers who have been actively involved in the research for several decades.

Replacing autocracy with democracy in working life

Taylorism had its big breakthrough in the Nordic countries in the first decades after the Second World War. Attempts were made to replace skill-based autonomy with an autocratic factory system where every single job function was designed in detail. Repetitive jobs were created, and the pace of work increased. The socio-technical movement in the Nordic countries searched for alternatives. In Norway in 1960s, Thorsrud and Emery (1976) made an amazing breakthrough for socio-technical action research. The aim was to create an alternative way of organizing work compared to the Tayloristic organization in which workers jointly managed the work organization instead of being managed *by* the work organization. The socio-technique quickly spread to the other Nordic countries, and played an important role during the 1970s. At that time Volvo became an icon of the Nordic version of the socio-technique.

In the 1980s alternatives to Taylorism were launched internationally through production concepts developed in Japan and the USA. Flexible specialization, just in time production and quality management were some of the catchwords. Attempts were made in the Nordic countries to further develop the socio-technical tradition in order to democratize the new work systems. In Sweden the ‘Good work’ strategy was launched by the trade union movement (Metallindustriarbetarförbundet 1985) in the middle of the 1980s, and in Denmark it was followed up in the 1990s with a trade union strategy for ‘the developmental work’ and several public programs were launched to promote developmental work (Hvid & Møller 1992, Hvid & Hasle 2003). In Norway, the labor market parties reached the ‘Tillægsaftalen’. This led to the implementation of innovative

processes with a high degree of employee participation. In Finland, the first steps were taken in the late 1980s to make the quality of working life a central topic in national policy discussions. This was followed by the launching of new national workplace development programs (Alasoine 1996).

Four different national policies for the development of work were created. However, in all the four Nordic countries, the policies were aimed to create a work policy of solidarity for prosperity: the new trends in management and technology were used to promote participation, to create jobs adjusted to the qualifications of the employees, and create opportunities for development.

Today the term 'democracy' is seldom used in related to working life. However, there are still many activities in the Nordic countries, which follow the path created in early working life research. Socio-technique is influential in current research questions: How can employees take part in processes of organizational change? How can employees' perspectives be an active part in the introduction of lean production in manufacturing and services? The widespread interest in learning in work is also related to the theme of democracy in working life research.

Has this long trial in working life research and practice had any effect on current working life? This is a very difficult question to answer. A quick answer could be: case studies say no, and comparative national studies say yes. Many follow up case studies have been carried out on experiments in which radical steps were taken to involve and empower employees (Svensson et al 2007, Arnkil 2003, Naschold 1994). In many cases, the experiments were successful during the experiment: the quality of working life did improve, productivity improved, and innovative capacity improved. However, in cases when follow up studies were made years after the experiment, the results were often disappointing. Very often the company had returned to traditional organizational concepts. The radical experiment seems to have great difficulties in surviving. However, it is perhaps wrong to measure the effects of initiatives to empower employees by carrying out isolated experiments. Each case is situated in a context with certain available technologies and with certain dominating principles for organizing work. Employers are influenced by international management concepts and employees are influenced by the work ethic of society. We cannot expect the results of an exceptional experiment to last for a very long time. Such experiments do, however, produce insights and ideas concerning the empowerment of employees, furthermore they influence the mainstream work organization both in private and public companies. There is some empirical support to suggest that a limited experiment can influence working life at the national level. When working life in different European countries is compared, it is very clear that autonomy, influence and learning opportunities are higher in the Nordic countries than in other European countries (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2007).

We will allow ourselves to conclude that Nordic working life research has played and continues to play an important role in the creation and maintenance of one important productive factor in the Nordic countries: a high degree of employee involvement. This facilitates a high innovative capacity, and a high degree of functional flexibility.

Representation of interests

Another dimension in the empowerment of employees and democratization is the collective representation of interests at company level. Actually, a strong and collaborative



representation of employees has been an important precondition for the work development programs mentioned above. The Nordic countries are characterized by strong union representation at company, local/regional and national levels (Kjellberg 2009, Due, Madsen, Strøby Jensen 2003). This strong representation has been a cornerstone in making the Nordic countries the most egalitarian societies in the economically developed world.

The conditions for local representation and collaboration are changing. On the one hand the number of precarious jobs is growing, also in the Nordic countries (Scheuer 2011). Here conditions for the creation of local representation are difficult. On the other, the number of individualized knowledge jobs is increasing. In this area too, the conditions for collective representation are difficult. In some of the 'strongholds' of collective representation, the shop stewards are strongly involved in business – in partnership with management. One other general challenge for the local representation of interests is the decreasing number and ratio of employees, organized in trade unions, see Kjellberg's article in this issue.

These challenges have however not yet had a damaging effect on the local organization of interests. On the contrary, the shop steward system still works quite effectively, although conditions are changing (Navrbjerg, Larsen & Johansen 2010). These changes are an important subject in working life research.

Another topic of interest is the effect of collective representation on the efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness of the company. Studies indicate that the collective representation of interests has a positive effect on the competitiveness of companies (Hull Kristensen 2003). The local representation of interests creates partnerships in the development of work and production; creates trust and mobilize human resources.

Learning

Learning in working life has been a key element in the endeavour to develop work in the Nordic countries. Learning has been linked to the effort to democratize working life and increase participation in working life, and it has been seen as a vehicle for the creation of social security. Learning concerns how employees may gain experiences in respect to participation and influence at work and thus provides a basis for empowerment. Experience based pedagogy and ideas about practice learning have played an important role in this field. These ideas have influenced the development of vocational education targeting low-skilled workers in the Nordic countries. Here training, general education and enlightenment have been combined.

Learning at work is a well-developed theme of Nordic working research. However, this research reveals an important contradiction, because, on the one hand there is an increasing focus on development and learning in order to mobilize human resources within a narrow corporate agenda. On the other hand, it is important to maintain a critical approach to the normative pressure that leads to development and learning, and it is essential to retain the focus on the opportunities for development and democratization that learning in the workplace represents.

Gender and working life

Women in the Nordic countries are less tied to the kitchen and to the care of children and elderly family members than in most other countries. The rate of participation in the

labor market for women in the Nordic countries is nearly equal to that of men. This has not however created gender equality in working life. On the contrary, men and women have different jobs - the horizontal segregation of work is just as clear as it was thirty years ago (Holt et al 2006). Generally women are in lower paid jobs than men, and the intensity of their work is higher. Moreover, the vertical division of labor is still profound: more men have more powerful positions than do women. The gender segregation in working life creates inequality, it creates one-sided work cultures with only one gender, and it creates barriers for both men and women in finding the right job – if the right job has the wrong gender, it is not available.

Gender segregation is created and reproduced in working life. It is however often difficult for employees and managers to recognize how they are ‘doing gender’. Gender differentiation is seen as ‘natural’ based on established ‘truths’ about gender. An important target for working life studies has for years been to question the established ‘truths’ of gender. However, there is still a lot to be done before horizontal and vertical gender segregation in work is undermined.

Work/life balance

Work is an important part of everyday life – and some times it is too important. Work can have a magnitude that does not leave much time and space for family, friends, the local community, leisure and political activities. The long term trend in the Nordic countries has been that families have more hours of paid work, because both men and women are participating in working life in full time jobs. Families experience time pressure, even though working hours have been reduced and holidays extended, in accordance with collective agreements (Bonke 2002).

The flexibilisation of working hours has during the last decade, made working hours more unpredictable at the expense of the life outside work. This development has been even stronger as a result of the growth of ‘boundaryless work’ (Alvin et al. 2011), where work is task-oriented and can be carried out across time and space – everywhere and at any time. Perhaps the work/life balance will be an empty concept for that kind of work, because it will be impossible to separate work from the rest of life. It is not a question of creating a balance between work and life, but to create life balance.

Healthy work

Occupational medicine has a long history, and as a discipline it is generally perceived as different from working life studies, although the boundaries between occupational medicine and working life studies are blurred. However, taking the WHO’s famous definition of health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (1986) it could be argued that all working life research should include health.

Working life research has played an important role especially when it comes to the psychosocial working environment and health. An example is Karasek and Theorell’s work on ‘healthy work’ (Karasek & Theorell 1989) which bridges the gap to occupational medicine. Karasek and Theorell’s central point is that employees’ control of their



work is an important factor for their health. Decision opportunities and learning opportunities are crucial for health. This line of thinking concurs with the socio-technical movement described above. Karasek developed his theory as early as the 1970s when he was affiliated with Swedish working life research units. Karasek's theory still seems to be very relevant. However, work has changed a lot since the theory was developed, and it is necessary to create new understandings of what creates employee control in modern working life and what creates uncertainty and chaos (Hvid et. al. 2010). Furthermore, demands have changed: more employees are facing higher emotional demands and involvement and learning does not simply lead to an employee's control over her job, it can also drain her.

In recent years, it has been pointed out that the relational aspects of working life are crucial for health: Trust, collaboration, reward, justice and appreciation seem to be crucial for health and well-being at work (Gylling Olsen et. al. 2010).

The 'social construction' of illness is another interesting topic which is now receiving greater attention: What is accepted as illness and what is not? How do employees and managers handle colleagues with reduced ability to work? How is an epidemic such as stress constructed (Wainwright & Calnan 2002).

Quality of working life and performance

The core interest of many organizational studies, most studies related to HRM and most of the management concepts concerns the improvement of performance. Working life research has another core interest: The quality of working life. This does not mean it is not interesting to find out whether a high quality in working life affects performance. If the high quality of working life is related to low performance, we have a win-lose situation. If, on the other hand, the high quality of working life can go hand in hand with high performance, then it is possible to create a win-win situation.

Nowadays it is almost impossible to promote any message related to working life, if the message is not packaged as part of a win-win discourse. Arguing for improvements in the quality of working life is impossible if performance is not improved.

Fortunately there is quite a lot of research documenting that it is possible to create a synergy between the quality of working life and performance. Research into innovation has clearly documented that work organizations with a high degree of employee empowerment are more innovative than those with a low degree of empowerment (Holm et.al. 2010, Nielsen et.al. 2006). Tuono Alsoine's arguments presented in this issue demonstrate the positive relation between quality of work and innovation, mainly based on Finnish research.

Studies have proved that working environments with both women and men are more efficient than working environments in which there is only one of the genders present. Other studies have shown that well-being and high performance are positively related (Kristensen 2010).

It seems to be quite simple: The demand for high performance will in itself improve quality of working life. But it is not that easy. Some researchers question this thesis (Godard 2001). Empirical analyses of the current development of the quality of working life do not confirm the thesis: The demands for performance have been high in the last decade, but these demands have not led to a higher degree of employee involvement or

improved learning opportunities, at least that is what can be concluded from national and European surveys (Pejtersen & Kristensen 2009, European Foundation 2007).

Perhaps it is more realistic to say that high quality working life can go hand in hand with certain demands concerning performance. If the demands are more user-oriented production, more incremental innovation, more sustainable production, they can go hand in hand with improved working conditions. However, improved working conditions may prove disadvantageous if demands for performance are formulated differently.

This is not, however, to argue that improved quality of working life is impossible. Demands for a higher quality of working life could be seen as an incentive for the development of production in both the public and private sectors. When employees and labor market organizations demand quality improvements in working life, and when these demands are followed by collective agreements and/or legislation, incentives to use the quality of work as a business case are created. Demands for the improvement of quality of work can create a 'creative destruction', where companies and institutions, which cannot follow the quality demands suffer, this offers better opportunities for those who can meet the demands.

Work and welfare costs

The Achilles heel (at least one of them) of the Nordic labor market is the high number of people excluded from work. Approximately 20% of the population between 15 and 65 years of age are not working or studying, but are receiving some kind of social support from the state or municipality. This results in a heavy burden on the public finances: Instead of collecting income taxes, the state has to pay social benefits. During the last 10-15 years especially, working life research has been mobilized in several research programs to find solutions to this costly problem. There have been different points of departure for this research:

- Social responsibility of the companies: what are socially responsible companies doing to create an inclusive working life for different ethnic groups and for people with reduced ability to work? Which benefits does the company get? Which benefits do the employees get? Can we learn something from the American experiences with diversity management?
- Sickness absenteeism: there are huge differences in sickness absenteeism from sector to sector and from company to company. Quite a lot of working life research has been conducted in this area: Why do these differences exist? How can a 'working life of presence' be created? How can a more friendly working life be created for those who have been on sick leave, and want to come back?
- Early retirement from the labor market: life expectancy is going up, and the number of people on old age pensions is increasing. This is seen as a heavy burden on the welfare system. Therefore research on seniors in working life has been promoted. The perspective is to adjust working life making it attractive for seniors to continue working for a longer time.

This cost reduction perspective will undoubtedly be important for working life research in the future. However, it seems that if the research narrowly focuses on cost reduction,



with no empathetic interest in the quality of (working) life, the research will be too limited to affect politics and society.

From work for welfare to work for sustainability

‘Sustainability’ seems to be the big project replacing or in continuity of that of the ‘welfare state’: the national perspective is expanded to a global perspective, the short term perspective is replaced with a long term perspective, including future generations, and the protection of natural resources is included in the production of wealth. Work did play a key-role in the creation of the welfare state, and work will play a key-role in the creation of a sustainable society. Companies are already to a certain extent involved in the creation of sustainability through CSR activities.

During the last decade research in the Nordic countries has studied the role of work and workers/employees/producers in the creation of sustainability (Kira 2003, Hvid 2006). The key focus in this, until now quite heterogeneous research, has been ‘sustainable work’. Here the connections between different aspects of working life are studied:

- the long term reproduction of individual and collective resources
- the social creation of capabilities for sustainable production
- employees as an active part in the creation of green production

In sustainable work, those who are doing the work are not only workers or employees. They are also citizens, actively involved in the creation of a more sustainable society.

Beyond instrumental perspectives: Trends in working life development.

Studying contemporary trends in work has been an important general topic in working life research throughout its history. This kind of research did not have a specific Nordic profile. Here we find the most important figures in Germany, Britain and first and foremost USA. This research plays an important role in the creation of societal self-reflection. Paid work is a very important part of modern society, and how paid work is developing and how we would like it to develop are very important aspects that need to be understood if we are to understand contemporary society.

Some of the most important current discussions here concern:

- work beyond globalization
- current trends in the organization of work: lean, flexibility, precarious work, self-management etc.
- work and identity
- post-industrial society – myths and reality?

Beyond instrumental perspectives (II): Studies of the history of working life are also an important element in the understanding of present-day working life. Here we have studies of the history of trades, companies, and work in local communities.

The blind spot of working life research – unpaid work

Working life research usually misses a very important part of work, namely unpaid work. This is a major blind spot considering that approximately half of all work is unpaid. This was already pointed out a number of years ago (Ingelstam 1980, Egelstad 1984), however only a few researchers have taken up the issue. Gender studies have created a bridge between the two worlds of work by studying the relation between obligations at home and opportunities in paid work (Kvande & Rasmussen). Studies of life modes (Højrup 2003) and biography studies have also bridged the gap between paid and unpaid work. However, it is still amazing that half of all work being done is almost excluded from working life research.

There are good reasons for this blind spot in working life research: the institutional setting of paid work is very different from the institutional setting of unpaid work. It could actually be argued that unpaid work is studied – not in working life research but in family research and community research. Nevertheless, it is a problem to separate paid and unpaid work in research because it can

- Contribute to the valuation of paid at the expense of unpaid work
- Separate the studies of work from the studies of needs
- Separate the studies of work from the life stories of those involved

Working life research has shed some light on non-paid work. However, the relation between paid and unpaid work is and will continue to be a challenge for working life research.

Current controversies related to working life research in four Nordic countries

Working life research is often heavily involved in ongoing debates and political initiatives. Here we will highlight four current debates, one for each of the four Nordic countries, where working life research is involved.

Norway

Working life studies in a changing society

Working life research in Norway seems expansive, spanning a wide range of disciplines and a broad area of subjects and research foci. It ranges from historical studies (e. g. Heiret et al, 2003) of societal contingencies of the work life development, macro studies of the labor market conducted by economists through analyses based on official statistics, and gradually on various register data-sets on employment and unemployment in regions, sectors, branches, and at the national level. The studies have given insight into who takes part in working life, and on inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, disclosing for instance a distinctly gendered working life (women dominate the health sector while men dominate traditional industries). Thus, the Norwegian labor market may be considered fairly rigid with limited flexibility in times of restructuring processes.



More sociologically based studies have for instance focused on the varying conditions and contingencies for women's participation in work life, particularly addressing for instance the use of involuntary part time contracts within sectors dominated by female labor. Recently, social geography has entered the scene, focusing on geographical space.

Other prominent issues engaging working life researchers today in Norway are temporary staffing in consequences of outsourcing and public procurement of public services, and the inclusion of marginalized groups. These address intersectional perspectives on people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, etc. Linked to the labor market studies there is a set of studies on wage determination and wage differentiation (discrimination). The wage structure will influence the labor market in term of productivity, competitiveness and the number of jobs.

Norway has an open economy, high employment and a great demand for labor. In recent years Norway has experienced an increasing migration, mainly by job seekers from Sweden and Eastern Europe and partly by refugees. Linked to this migration flow, several studies have been made on, for example, the situation of Polish workers in Norway (see eg. Dølvik & Eldring, 2005) and on how immigrants from the third world find their way in the labor market in the borderland between welfare support and jobs (Røed et. al. 2011). There are also studies on discrimination mechanisms (Rogstad, J 2001) and social dumping (Alsos & Eldring, 2008).

Field experiments from the industrial democracy project of the 1960s, mentioned earlier, have been followed up by tripartite intervention and research programs in which labor unions, employers' federations and the Government have taken part. The focus has gradually shifted from productivity measures and enterprise development in single enterprises to both productivity and strategic measures for clusters of enterprises in regions (VS 2010, VRI- programs).

During the last 20 years several other important topics have been addressed at enterprise level. All the Nordic countries have gone through considerable restructuring processes in this period. The privatization and outsourcing drives have been strong in the public sector, and just in time production (JIT), outsourcing, merging and downsizing have been strong in the private sector. Several studies have been carried out on the impact of downsizing and restructuring processes. Most studies focus on the impact on each individual worker, but also on the quality of the process as such (Holter et.al, 1998, Dale-Olsen (2005).

There is a strong interest in power, democracy and co-determination in Norwegian working life research. These topics were included in the power study in Norway some years back, and were discussed in several publications (Engelstad et. al, 2003). Numerous studies have also been carried out on flexible working life, new management systems and gender issues.

Sweden

Work fare policy and differentiation

One controversy that involves scientists from many different fields concerns the role of the social policy measures in relation to labor market policy tools. The present government has introduced time frames in the social security system as well as in the unemployment benefit system. The idea is to shorten sick leave and get the individuals back to

work more quickly. In the end, the individual's work capacity is tested in relation to job vacancies throughout the labor market. Social security measures and the labor market policy system have been closely interwoven to improve the efficiency of the welfare state system. The basic reason is to cut costs.

Scientists from different fields have shown that time frames in the social insurance system do not shorten individual sick leave periods to any larger extent. Individuals with somewhat better health and attachment to the labor market can be affected by the shortened numbers of days. But for others, stress and worries about incomes and the future of the family situation worsen health conditions. Of those who had used all their possible 500 days for sick leave in 2009/2010 around two thirds were women, with an average age of 47 years. Psychic diagnoses and musculoskeletal disorders were the most common. Stress, bad working conditions and working environments cause many of the problems. After the last possible payment from the sickness benefit system they are supposed to start looking for jobs. They are left in a vacuum where social scientists now show how poverty, not least among children, is a growing problem. On the other hand, the economic picture shows a fast growth and a stable national economy. The result of the retrenchment policies is an increasing differentiation based on class and gender.

Finland

Are the problems in working life real or imagined?

Finnish work institutions are nowadays facing large-scale adjustment pressures. The employment rate of those of working age (15 to 64) ought to be increased significantly from the current 68 per cent in order to compensate for the rapidly aging population. This should be done at the same time as Finland's leading industrial clusters - forest industry and telecommunications - are relocating their activities abroad, the public sector is forced to rebalance its budgets and too many working age citizens are outside active working life. In this situation, both the media and working life research have been accused of presenting an excessively negative picture of the current state of Finnish working life. It is maintained that there has been too much talk about increasing stress, bad management and other kinds of problems, whereas much less has been said about the real positive improvements that have taken place in the quality of working life in Finland. But simultaneously some of the more detailed analyses show that the citizens' views about Finnish working life vary mainly in line with the individuals' own concrete work experiences. Sometimes the frustrations and disappointments people have lived through generate distrust towards the established representation structures, and they may also stimulate new kinds of protest behaviours in the political arena.

Denmark

The stressful controversy about work stress

In Denmark, as in most other highly developed economies, stress and wellbeing have been central to the debate about work during the last decade. Many companies offer



employees with stress symptoms special treatment. A corporate policy on how to react when an employee is hit by work stress has been established in many companies. In the public sector, employer and employee associations have entered an agreement which states that every third year, wellbeing must be monitored in a survey to create a basis for improvements in the area of well being. Wellbeing and the psychosocial working environment are topical, but what are we actually talking about? There are both visible and disguised controversies related to this question.

The point of departure comes from what can be called ‘a Nordic working environment tradition’ inspired by Karasek, Theorell and others. The ‘Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire’ has played a central role focusing on the quality of jobs and work organization. This approach is primarily in opposition to HRM approaches which concentrate on motivation, attitudes and loyalty, and it is in line with the Nordic tradition for job development.

Since 2005 the approach to psychosocial work has gradually changing, emphasizing social relations and leadership. The ‘Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire’ was developed further to include ‘trust, collaboration and justice’. The understanding of the psychosocial working environment gradually shifted towards leadership, collaboration between management and employees and basic values. The concept of the ‘social capital’ of the organization has gained a central position in the understanding of the psychosocial working environment.

Towards the end of the decade, a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of wellbeing and work stress was launched. The ‘National Research Centre for the Working Environment’ promoted the so-called CATS model – Cognitive Activation of Stress model. The model was developed in Norway by Holger Ursin and Hege T. Eriksen. It seems, however, to have broken away from the Nordic psychosocial work environment tradition. The model is based on the research of Lazarus and Seleye’s, but has a somewhat different, very initialized approach. Stress is understood as a function of the individual cognitive appraisal of work, relations, organization and health. This means that stress can best be fought by changing attitudes, understandings and aspirations.

The advocates of all three approaches can refer to scientific evidence for their positions. Science can therefore not guide us in choosing the best approach. The choice is basically political: should we change the job (work organization and technologies in use), should we change the social relations at work or should we change the attitude of the individual? A pragmatic answer seems to be: why not change everything? In some workplaces, one approach seems relevant and practicable. In another workplace, another approach is appropriate. However, we would like to ask whether the concept of the psychosocial working environment can contain such different approaches and still be regarded as a single concept. Or are we actually addressing different problem complexes that would gain from being abstracted into their own categories and dealt with in different ways at the workplaces?

Current challenges for working life research

The Nordic countries are assumed to be the countries with the highest density of working life researchers per capita. However, working life research in the Nordic countries has been institutionalized differently than it is in the rest of the world: a major part of

working life research in the Nordic countries is carried out in institutions which are specifically committed to working life research. They may be interdisciplinary working life departments at universities, or they may be independent research institutions. In most other countries working life research is included in disciplinary departments at universities or departments at business schools.

This specific institutional setting makes working life research more dependent on prevailing political agendas, because important parts of the research are dependent on specific research programs. This makes the research a constant movement towards ‘what is up?’ The main argument here is, however, that Nordic working life research also has a core identity – an identity this journal aims to contribute to the maintenance of.

In the following, we present institutional challenges for Nordic working life research in the four countries.

Norway

Two classical studies are fundamental in Norwegian working life research: Sverre Lysgaard’s functionalistic study of ‘the workers collective’ (Lysgaard 1986) and Einar Thorsrud’s action-oriented study of democracy at work. (Thorsrud & Emery 1976). Each of these two classic studies illustrates, in its own way, a common view inherent in most of Norwegian working life research, as well as practical policies of Norwegian working life in general: The practical and theoretical acknowledgement that workers and managers share a common destiny; consequently they acknowledge the advantages of arrangements that promote broad participation in the development of working life as well as in society.

Further, another symptomatic feature has been the political engagement of the researchers and their interest in solving the operational challenges of every day working life (Guldbrandsen, 1993). This has given the working life research a problem- and reform-oriented character, thematically focused on the working environment (a research characteristic that for instance contributed to the Norwegian Working Environment Act of 1977), inclusion and exclusion mechanisms in the labor market and the role and rights of women in working life.

This tendency towards problem and reform oriented research has also been supported by the institutional arrangements framing Norwegian work life research. Many of the work life studies are conducted by so called independent research institutes, therefore dependent on research funding from stakeholders who pay to have problems solved. In Norway, the state represents an important stakeholder in this sense, channeling research funds for instance through problem and action oriented research programs managed by the Norwegian Research Council. As of today there is, for instance, a separate program for research on absenteeism. Further, the former working life program addressed, generally, the political ambition of an “inclusive working life” and corresponded with the political tripartite governed program for an inclusive work life (avtalen om inkluderende arbeidsliv). Several projects have crossed the borders between welfare, migration and working life research.

In 2010, the three formerly separate research programs in these fields merged into one large program covering most aspects of welfare, migration and working life. There are some benefits to be had from the merger of overlapping research fields into one large



program. But in Norway there is a danger that funding of working life research will basically be allocated according to a welfare perspective in the future. If so, working life research will disappear or be reduced as a distinct research field.

Sweden

Working life science has been restructured in Sweden. There has been a long tradition of research in work environment and health issues in working life. These studies merged with the social science-based working life research in the 1990s in the National Institute for Working Life (NIWL). It had research offices in five different places in the country and was the largest provider of working life research together with the biggest universities (Albin, Johansson, Järholm & Wadensjö 2009). One of the first decisions taken by the incoming right wing government in 2006 was to close down NIWL, which was done in 2007. A questionnaire in 2008 to all former NIWL-employees showed that around half of all researchers with a PhD-exam had left the field of working life research. Retirement and early retirement was one cause for leaving the field and around 20 percent got other types of jobs. One effect, which has not been discussed so much, is that the generational shift came to a halt, as there were few places where this could happen anymore. The universities did not have resources to employ more researchers in working life science, specifically not with an empirical interest in practices in work places and even more so doctoral students with these interests. In order to start counteracting this development, Swedish working life researchers started the 'Forum for working life research', which among other things holds yearly scientific congresses where both doctoral students and researchers with a long experience can meet. What is obvious is that the organization of scientific results and information need to be developed. One positive trait was that the two scientific journals that NIWL had published – one in Swedish (*Arbetsmarknad & Arbetsliv*) and one in English (*Economic and Industrial Democracy*) – could be saved. They are now receiving some funds from 'Swedish council for working life and social research' and are hosted by working life science at Karlstad University and Gothenburg University, and economic history at Uppsala University, respectively.

The institutional weakening of Swedish working life research has not been compensated by an equivalent growth of university research. This would be especially important today, when so many new things are happening in working life, with work organizations reaching 'deep into the private sphere' and 'far out into the surrounding society' (von Otter 2007:90).

Finland

So far, working life research in Finland has not been affected by hard times the same way it has in many other western countries. The research teams in different universities are continuing their work as before, analyzing problems of working life is a popular topic among the new student generations, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health has maintained its position as a large independent sectorial research institute, and the research funding channels and developmental infrastructures have also remained largely intact. Improving the quality of working life is an important topic in current Finnish

policy discussions, and the different societal actors are actively supporting the launch of new developmental activities.

But this situation is not necessarily easily sustainable. The entire Finnish national innovation system has come under heavy pressure because it has not been able to deliver the expected outcomes either academically or in the form of new business activities. Finnish working life research can also be criticized for not having produced enough internationally high-level publications or widespread positive changes in workplaces. Therefore Finland may be facing new cuts and institutional rearrangements in the future. This is a real risk especially if the researchers themselves and the societal actors interested in work research do not make extra efforts to show the actual relevance and future development prospects of this research field.

Denmark

In Denmark there has never been any large institution for working life research. The National Research Centre for Working Environment (NFA) carries out working life research. However, much of the research in the NFA is health research, and only a minor part is working life research. The working life research in the institute seems to have been reduced.

One other big public research institute that conducts working life research is the National Center for Welfare Research (SFI). However, working life research is only a minor part of the institute's total research.

Most working life research has been conducted at university departments, usually interdisciplinary departments. For many years there have been working life research units at Roskilde University, the Danish Technical University, Aalborg University, and the Department of Psychology in Aarhus. In recent years new institutions have taken up working life research: DPU at Aarhus University is increasing the working life research there, and at Copenhagen Business School new communities for working life research have been established too. Working life research is also carried out in some private institutions (TeamArbejdsliv, Kubix and other places).

To create a national community across the many local research communities, a national organization for working life research was established in 1993(?) – Centre for Working Life Studies (CSA). This community has created contacts across institutions, and it has created the institutional framework around the Danish working life journal: *Tidsskrift for Arbejdsliv*.

The current economic crisis is a challenge for working life research. We can expect that the public interest in preventing marginalization and expulsion from the labor market will decrease. When there are too many people for too few jobs, we can expect that interest will be directed towards the creation of jobs. Here working life research can also contribute: the improvement of working life can contribute to increases in the capacity of innovation and productivity and in this way new jobs can be created. Working life research can also raise more fundamental questions about the boundaries between paid and unpaid work, and how to live a life of quality in a world where there are not enough jobs, and where global competition is tough.

Another challenge for current working life research is a strong tendency to individualize occupational health. This is very clear in research on the psycho-social working



environment. Here a wave of research is currently emerging about individuals' handling of work strain in the working environment. The view is that improvements in working conditions and working life will not have an effect because it is the cognitive orientation of some employees that creates the problems. It is important for working life research to engage in dialogue with this trend to maintain and perhaps also sharpen the profile of working life research.

Towards the future

It is not perhaps too arrogant to say that during the 20th century, the Nordic societies have in many respects opened new paths for the modernization of Western institutions of work. It is possible to talk about a Nordic model which has been based e.g. upon high levels of participation, the flexible redirection of human resources into new areas of business, systematic efforts to improve the quality of working life, strong investments in knowledge and skills, good relations of collaboration between the labour market partners, solidaristic wage and redistribution policies and well functioning basic social safety networks.

These achievements will offer good points of departure for new achievements also during the 21st century. But the environment in which the Nordic societies are building on to their national institutions of work has changed dramatically. New labour resources are coming to labour markets especially in the developing countries which stimulate global economic growth. But, simultaneously, global competition over jobs will increase and the world is moving towards increasingly difficult resource and environmental problems. More sustainable forms of production and consumption must be developed everywhere, and the required changes will also dramatically change the ways we work and cultures of working in the future.

It is still an open question to what extent the Nordic societies will be able to adjust their national employment systems to the new playing field that is at developing. Under these conditions, Nordic social scientific work research has a duty to analyse the changes that are going on in the world of work and to communicate the results of their analyses to the various societal actors within their societies. Simultaneously, the researchers have a duty to participate actively in an effort to renew the existing Nordic institutions and policies of work so that the basic values upon which they have been based can be defended and carried forward successfully also during the coming decades.

The aim of the journal

Nordic working life research is an integrated part of the Nordic welfare societies. It is marked by a long tradition of involvement and participation in working life, and it has contributed to strengthening involvement and participation. It is influenced by the labor market traditions in the Nordic countries with collective agreements and organized collaboration at workplaces, and it has contributed to the renewal of industrial relations in the Nordic countries. Governmental institutions have influenced working life research, and the research has contributed to the development of active labor market policies, the promotion of healthy work, the promotion of learning, competence development and innovation. The Nordic countries are among the most egalitarian countries in the world.

Working life research has been involved in attempts to create equality with regard to gender, ethnicity and age.

Each of the Nordic countries has its independent history and has built its unique institutions. However, there is a lot we can learn from each other. We find that during the last decade inter-Nordic inspiration has decreased. There could be two reasons for this: Internationalization has been interpreted as Anglification, and Europeanization has been stronger than Nordification. This leads us to the journal's aims:

Aim no 1

The journal will contribute to a revitalization of the exchange of knowledge, insights and experiences across the Nordic countries concerning working life.

We should of course not neglect the importance of Europeanization and Internationalization. Actually, in the international research community, Nordic institutions and experiments are often seen as a specific model – a model not simply to duplicate, but to learn from.

Aim no 2

The journal will distribute research-based knowledge to an international audience about working life issues in the Nordic countries.

Neither working life nor the institutions that support the quality of working life are stable. International influence and internal erosion creates a constant destruction of working life and institutions. Simultaneously a constant reconstruction and renewal is going on.

Aim no 3

The journal will contribute to the constant reconstruction of working life and institutions supporting quality of working life through the creation of dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

That however, calls for the development of a community around the journal, including researchers and practitioners. How such a community can be developed is not at all clear for us, right now. It will be discussed during the coming year (2012), e.g. at the working life conference in Elsinore, in April next year. We will also launch different initiatives on our website: www.nordicwl.dk.

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End note

¹ Only four Nordic countries are included in this article. Island is not mentioned. Unfortunately there are no Islanders on the editorial board. We hope this will change in the future.