

A psycho-societal perspective on neoliberal welfare services in Denmark: Identification and ambivalence

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Abstract

This article introduces a psycho-societal approach to the micro-processes of Danish neoliberal welfare services, elaborating a learning and identity perspective. My many years of encounters with professionals in welfare services have illuminated how they display a strong identification with, but also a significant ambivalence towards, welfare service innovation, being both enthusiastic and burdened. People-to-people work in public welfare services has strong roots in providing everyday learning that facilitates participation and co-ownership. This is however a challenging task since decades of neoliberal policies and practices has dominated the Danish welfare sector. By applying a psycho-societal conceptual approach - illustrated by an empirical example - I sketch out how identification, ambivalence and defence are significant features of welfare service professionals' learning and practices. On the one hand, current practice-based work situates a skilled and devoted professional to direct processes and outcomes based on personalised identification - often in collaboration with citizens. On the other hand, a number of ambivalences and defence reactions saturate the very same processes and outcomes.

Learning and identity work in multiple arenas

People-to-people work in public welfare services has for many years been founded on a learning approach as one of the imperative understandings of human development and growth. In practice-based work, human, professional and organisational developments serve as core activities and objectives - many delivered in different forms of collaboration and participation. Consequently, learning in public welfare services is a strong dimension that seeks to stimulate human development, greater coping and higher life quality. However, this represents a difficult challenge for a public sector that for decades has been regulated by regimes of New Public Management. Research findings indicate that NPM provides limited space for transformative learning - both for professionals and citizens. Learning theory, on the other hand, is rich in transformative learning concepts that offer a variety of ways and

paths for change - such as experiential and collaborative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005) social learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Becker-Schmidt & Knapp, 1987), situated or action learning (Dilworth & Willis, 2003; Cho & Marshal, 2010) as well as more critical concepts like sociological imagination and critical pedagogy (Negt, 1975, 1985; Ziehe & Stubenrauch, 1996; Ziehe, 2001). But learning also reveals yet another side since it is a potent tool of implementation - and thereby serves the objectives of interventions of many kinds. In Denmark, welfare service professionals, users and managers for decades have been active agents in implementing numerous welfare strategies and societal transformations through interventions, developmental work and workplace learning (Andersen & Dybbroe, 2011; Diochon & Anderson, 2011; Kamp & Dybbroe, 2015; Poder, 2009). However, research findings show that learning can be ambiguous and ambivalent; on the one hand, it can transform human lives, social structures and organisations, but on the other hand, it can function as effective tools of political, professional and societal needs.

In contemporary learning theory and practice, we talk about a relational turn in professional learning, where learning in practice involves working with others to interpret a problem of practice and to respond to it and through these processes come to see the world as the others see it (Edwards, 2010; 2012). Adding to these newer understandings, my research contributes to the psychosocial turn in learning and organisational research (Andersen, 2015; 2012a & b; 2005; Andersen & Dybbroe, 2011). When investigating practice-based work, we need to understand the agents as learning, emotional and cognitive subjects, who thereby involve their life history and experiences. In my previous research I have documented how professionals individualise themselves when engaging in practice-based work and confronted with neoliberal governance regimes (Andersen, 2015; 2005). Consequently, what we find is that professionals in practice-based work display a number of differentiated ways of understanding, processing and enacting the objectives and goals of neoliberal governance demands. We might label these intersections of significant interaction and meaning 'sticky constructions', as suggested by Britzman, acknowledging the potential bearing of insight of current welfare service work shared by these phenomena (Britzman, 2011).

Neoliberal policy and welfare practices in Denmark

Let me just briefly - before outlining my psycho-societal framing - sketch out how neoliberal policy and welfare practices have been implemented in Denmark and their implications. As mentioned, my interest aims to retell the (psycho-societal) in-depth meanings and

implications of welfare service modernisation. The dominant welfare sector development began in the late 1980s - and has been developed ever since through various modernisation programmes - based on implementation by the Danish public sector and its governmental administrators. The initial programme launched in the 1980s was characterised by a mixture of 'hard' traditional objectives of productivity and effectiveness and 'soft' democratic and professional goals such as joint influence and inter-professional collaboration. The objectives were to increase professional service delivery profiles and focus on prevention, to decentralise power from the state to county and local government, to move from centralised administrative and financial systems to local financial frameworks and site-based management, and finally to develop a more democratic structure that would engage personnel as well as service recipients (Andersen, 1988; Andersen, 2003).

The programme and the decentralised, local practices combined democratic ideals and goals of participation and influence with NPM economic objectives of rationalisation and efficiency. This combination often gave rise to personal and professional difficulties and tensions in the institutions. These tensions were however rarely articulated to managers, administration or politicians (Andersen, 1999). Research findings have further documented how New Public Management has led to pluricentric coordination in public governance providing a renewed focus on managers and managerial procedures, leading to the decentralisation of professional work identities in welfare services (e.g. Reff, Sørensen & Sehested, 2011; Buch & Andersen, 2013; Wihlman, Hoppe, Wihlman & Sandmark, 2014). A recent literature review points to how performance management in Danish welfare services works but not always by its intentions. A number of non-intended effects occur of which target-fixation is one and another is that marginalized citizens seems to slip out of focus (Møller, Iversen & Andersen, 2016).

These welfare modernisation scenarios comprised service and governance innovation (Hartley, 2005), as well as institutional in-house collaboration, democracy and co-creation of local budgets, since a pivotal focus of these programmes was on local institutional entities. The modernisation programmes were implemented top-down and due to this a number of barriers appeared (Andersen, 1999; 2003; 2015); further, the outcome led to more 'in-house' innovation and a long-term perspective was needed before it became possible to reap the fruits of a more inter-organisational, inter-sectorial and open innovation practice as documented in many settings (Hartley, Sørensen & Torfing, 2013). Following on from this,

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the learning arenas focused on workplace learning and a more qualified professionalism, but the emphasis was also on strengthening a multi-actor learning approach, since employees, managers and users were to collaborate more and better with regards to more prevention, local budgeting, joint influence and decision-making and quasi-market competition. Another challenge involved better collaboration with the local administration that was supposed to assist the organisational, financial and professional changes, but this proved to be a long, difficult and ambivalent process (Andersen, 1999; 2003).

Summing up, neoliberal practices in welfare services have paved the way for numerous organisational, financial and cultural changes which have, on the one hand, provided more differentiated and efficient welfare services. On the other hand, standardisation and quality assessment regulating everyday work has led to a cross pressure on welfare professionals, due to the burden of the unaddressed voices and lives of vulnerable citizens (Andersen & Dybbroe, 2011; 2016). Additionally, government-driven objectives tend to establish an ambivalent cocktail in which the everyday work of many professionals presents an accumulation of tensions and contradictions. Development and change towards welfare service efficiency and practice-based democracy are likely to cause anxiety, defensiveness and ambivalence (Andersen, 2003; 2011; 2015).

Transformative learning and organisations as psycho-societal and interactional phenomena

From a learning and organisational point of view, decades of transforming the Danish public sector and welfare services have actually led to a significant number of changes. We have moved from mono-professional and in-house human service organisations to multi-professional and cross-organisational entities, from conventional social work or deficit approaches towards stronger preventative efforts, from public professionals as the sole caregivers to professional-user collaboration shaped by NGOs and the local community, from conventional work integration and community activities to social enterprises and public-private-civic partnerships and from traditional secondary health care activities (e.g. rehabilitation) to health centres in co-creation with NGOs and sometimes private enterprises. These changes in organisations and their objectives and collaborative formats also impact upon welfare professions and professionals and signal their parallel transformations: from mono to plural functions and competences, from sole authority to co-production and shared responsibility and from work 'for' to working 'with' (Andersen, 2015). My line of argument

indicates that these findings involve processes of personalised identification in professionals but also ambivalences and defence mechanisms.

The concept of expertise and knowledge suggested by Engeström and Middleton and described as '*collaborative and discursive construction of tasks, solutions, visions, breakdowns and innovations within and across systems*' is central for understanding how welfare employees contribute to the transformation of service deliveries but also to gradual everyday innovation (Engeström & Middleton, 1996: 4). Therefore, taking a point of departure in the idea that '*today the trend is towards de-institutionalisation, hybrid forms of organisation and co-operative mastery of knowing and knowledge production, towards open expertise produced in multi-actor networks*' (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004: 23), it becomes clear that collaborative public welfare work rests on new forms of knowledge and professional work. Anne Edwards points to '*the centrality of knowledge to fluid responsive practices*' and she suggests that '*relational agency works against the grain of 'organizational professionalism' by asserting that professional practices are driven by professional values and involve paying attention to relationships and trust in the expertise of others and the quality of the resources, both conceptual and material*' (Edwards, 2010). Consequently, we can talk about a relational turn in professional learning, where learning in practice involves working with others to interpret a problem of practice and to respond to it and through these processes come to see the world as the others see it (Edwards, 2012).

Adding to these newer understandings, my research points to the psychosocial turn in learning and organisational research also addressed by other scholars, e.g. Redman, Bereswill & Morgenroth, 2010; Andersen & Dybbroe, 2011; Salling Olesen, 2012; Froggett, 2002. When investigating collaborative public innovation, we need to understand the agents as learning, emotional and cognitive subjects who involve their history and experiences. In my research I document how professionals individualise themselves when engaging in collaborative processes. Some are enthusiastic, finding it easy to negotiate and engage in the service deliveries and user collaboration, whereas others are burdened by the demands and complexity and others again experience this as yet another brick in the wall of an optimised and overloaded work situation leading to demotivation (Andersen, 2015; 2005; Andersen & Dybbroe, 2016; 2011). The psycho-societal approach offers a conceptualisation of how we can identify the social in the subject and the subject in the social, meaning that human beings'

inner conscious and unconscious worlds form and are formed by the societal world (Leithäuser and Volmerg, 1988; Froggett, 2002; Salling Olesen, 2012; Leithäuser, Meyerhuber & Schottmayer, 2009; Andersen, 2012a & b; Andersen & Dybbroe, 2011). I label this position ‘psycho-societal’ in order to stay close to the roots in critical theory as developed by the Frankfurter-School accentuating the interrelation and interconnectedness between societal structures and cultures and the formation of subjectivity and identity. I suggest that identification, ambivalence and defence reactions constitute a significant (psycho-societal) analytical grid through which to study welfare services. Social research which applies these concepts creates representations of social life with diversity, depth and dynamics that might otherwise be difficult to access. In this way, we are able to move beyond the traditional binary notions of, for example, subject and object and rational versus irrational behaviour in organisations, learning and social interaction to reveal how the inner and outer lives are connected, interdependent and capable of transcending rational, linear empirical approaches (Brock, 2011; Britzman, 2011; Gabriel, 2002; Andersen, 2015; 2012a & b). My application of the concept of identification is central for deepening our understanding of the collaborative and learning processes in welfare services. The psycho-societal understanding of identification emphasises that these processes are dynamic parts of our personality and professional development, where we adapt and model ourselves based on the desirable qualities and actions of another person or persons or desirable causes. These are conscious and unconscious mental processes formed at an early age but in adult life they adapt, change and still form our professional and personal life. Sandor Ferenczi states that ‘*the ego is always in search of objects, i.e. individuals or ‘desirable causes’, to identify with; these can act as objects of transference or we can introject them in order to grow and mature*’ (Ferenczi, 1994; A. Freud, 1966 (1936)). Professional and personal performance then implicates intrasubjectivity and intersubjectivity contextualised by societal, cultural and organisational settings (Benjamin, 1995). My point here is that the ‘grand narratives’ of public welfare services like user and staff democracy, participation, public, civic and private collaboration, social sustainability, etc. require professionals and citizens to identify with these narratives in order for these to be realised and developed. The professionals identifying professionally and personally with these objectives provide the ‘engine’ of welfare services but simultaneously these processes might produce idealisation, ambivalence and anxiety - closely related to the concrete societal, organisational and financial framing (Andersen, 2015).

Psycho-societal research processes

My interest then is to pinpoint and further discuss how psycho-societal concepts can be applied in deeper understandings of welfare services. In the context of a research analysis - which differs basically from a treatment setting - the non-conscious can be observed through various forms of expression and thus be made the subject of interpretation and analysis. These forms of expression may be psychoanalytic processes such as condensations, where multiple thoughts can be combined into one mental image, displacements, where an emotion can transfer from one object/phenomenon to another, transferences as previously mentioned and ambivalence, where an object or phenomenon arouses conflicting emotions, e.g. both negative and positive (A. Freud, 1966 (1936)). Unconscious actions are intentional and goal-oriented, although the objective may not be clear. Understanding an unconscious action therefore does not involve uncovering the unconscious drives, but interpreting the non-conscious or pre-conscious meaning in order to represent social reality in a more multifaceted manner. Britzman points out how Freud positioned objections, objects, and obstacles to constitute psychoanalytic movement and thereby suggests that it is as if Freud is always addressing a learning subject from the point of view of learning from difficulties. In this way, objections to processes of psychoanalysis transform into psychoanalytic objects such as ego defences, resistance to resistance, constructions in analysis, moral anxiety and the superego, transference and love, free association, dreams and group psychology. Britzman names these phenomena 'sticky constructions' (Britzman, 2011:20) and I argue that welfare service and professional 'troubling issues' might very well be labelled 'sticky constructions', emphasising that these entities represent a learning story for us to uncover and tell.

The concept of inter-subjectivity also adds an important theoretical dimension to these questions, involving an understanding in which the other is not merely the object of the ego's need/drive or cognition/perception but has a separate and equivalent centre of self. This dimension seems quite important in people-to-people work which relies heavily on interaction and inter-subjectivity. The other must be recognised as another subject in order for the self to fully experience its subjectivity in the other's presence (Benjamin, 1995:30). These approaches may thus help to dissolve traditional binary notions of, for example, subjects and objects, rational versus irrational behaviour in organisations, learning and social interaction and lead to more humane and differentiated welfare services (Brock, 2011; Britzman, 2011; Yannis, 2002). This promotes analyses of individuals, organisations and social interactions

which may go beyond rational, linear, empirical lines of evidence (Andersen & Dybbroe 2011; Andersen, 2006). The constellation of the psycho- and the societal hints at the intertwined and refined intersections of the subject and the societal. The psycho-societal approach identifies a pair of research processes as pivotal. Firstly, to investigate the ways and forms of how societal structures are established in the psychic structures and are transformed into mechanisms of regulation. Secondly, the reverse process: how do the operating impulses interlink and associate themselves with the societal roles and contexts in a search for satisfaction (Leithäuser & Volmerg, 1988; Leithäuser, Meyerhuber & Schottmayer, 2009; Salling Olesen, 2012). Applied to my illustrative case, this leads to a dual perspective of first identifying the mechanisms of regulation in societal and organisational framings and how social workers voice and act their inner and outer psychic manifestations in accommodating these, and secondly investigating how social workers operate and address their impulses for satisfaction in their societal and organisational framings.

Identification and ambivalence

I now turn to a social work case illustrating an in-depth psycho-societal approach that I studied in a sickness benefit office in a social services department in a city in Denmark. The social services department was caught in crossfire between socio-cultural, economic, and political structures that affected management and staff in different ways. During my data collection and interaction with case officers, I was influenced by the harshness shown by the department managers in their view of the social workers, which positioned them as competent but very vulnerable and too 'soft' to deal with clients' problems in the right manner. The case officers, on their part, were quite sceptical and ambivalent towards fulfilling their share of case work and decisions, which they preferred to hand over to the middle manager. A psycho-societal perspective clarified how the social services department transferred a crucial dilemma in social work to case officers by processes of individualisation and defence reactions. The dilemma was related to the disparity between clients' complex life situations and the limited possibilities for case officers to resolve them. I identified an ambiguity in this transference. In cases of failure, management sought explanations not by looking at possible organisational or societal restrictions or matters of social policy, but rather at the social workers' personal and professional life histories - they were subjected to a life historical individualisation and stigmatisation. Case officers, on the other hand, displayed ambivalence towards influencing case administrative work, which could be interpreted as an adequate defence mechanism. The displacement contained a double bind: the case officers' duty, on which they were assessed, was to solve their clients' problems, but at the same time, they

did not have sufficient means to do so. When they failed, they were subjected to individual stigmatisation (Andersen & Dybbroe, 2016; Andersen, 2005).

Interviewed social workers exposed the contrast between a department management wanting shared decision case management and the ambivalence felt by the case workers. These schisms led to problems and criticism.

The opportunities for influence are many. At the same time, the political decisions lead you to say no to citizens ... Maybe I feel that this sick person (client) should be rehabilitated, but I know very well that X local authority does not think as we (social workers) do. That's when you're forced to throw your own professionalism out with the tea leaves. Then I have to remind myself that this is what I've been educated for - that the work I'm doing won't necessarily harmonise with my private attitude, or not even always with my own professionalism. I was employed to follow rules.

Karen, social worker

Educating people for social work provides a professional grounding in social work - and moreover, professional expectations of quality in such work - and thereby form or prepare the development of a personalised and professional identification, and professional work identity, that can be enacted in practice. Social workers bring images of 'good case management' into their professional work (Andersen & Ahrenkiel, 2003). The social worker takes a professional and individual standpoint on whether the case administration corresponds to her professional beliefs, standards and ethics. However, in case work other rationales and opinions often dominate. From this it follows that the employee might be caught in conflicting pressures. This is not an easy task.

Here I am, dressed in my holistic outlook, thinking that we really should have supported this client more. I could argue for this from now and for ever more. (...) In specific cases both your hands are sort of tied and you want to put this across to the client. I suppose you might risk informing the client that this isn't your personal decision. We ought perhaps to talk about what we're actually doing.

Karen, social worker

As a workplace, the social services department was dominated by a discourse of New Public Management, paving the way for efficiency, evidence and objective-driven performance. In the analysis, I have pointed out defence reactions, resistance potentials and displacements that

take on several organisational and interpersonal forms. The administration - as an organisational system - transferred a difficult human dilemma in social work to the case officers: how to solve complicated life problems of clients with limited organisational and financial resources. The managers understood the relation between individuals and organisation in individualised terms like 'a vulnerable personality' and depicted the life stories of the staff in a potentially stigmatising way – and hereby individualised and psychologised. There was a double bind in the context of the displacement. The case officers' professional objective, on which they were assessed, was to solve their clients' problems, but at the same time, they did not possess the necessary options to do so. When they failed, they were subjected to individual stigmatisation. My research analysis was able to illuminate how social workers were involved in a complex exchange of emotions, ambivalences and defences about case work involving different stakeholders, i.e. management, clients and co-workers, as well as drawing upon their own professional identity work. These conflicts appeared individualised inasmuch as they were pinpointed on the individual social worker. Furthermore, active organisational dynamics were driven by displacements from management that transferred the responsibility of fulfilling demanding work objectives solely to the individual social worker - without reflecting broader organisational, financial or societal matters.

The social workers expressed a great deal of ambivalence regarding their influence on case decisions and case work. They voiced both positive and negative emotions and evaluations of their case work. The ambivalence could be understood as an adequate defence mechanism against the blaming tactics used by the administrative managers and politicians. Some social workers experienced a tension between their professional identity and the organisational and case-based influences they faced. As mentioned above, professional identity functions via processes of identification that are fuelled by desirable objects like 'doing solid case work' as well as undesirable objects like avoiding instrumental target-driven case work. In many cases these processes and emotions collide. This collision could be observed as professional and personal uneasiness, criticism and dissatisfaction borne by some of the case workers.

Paid work as a multi-constituted phenomenon

In order to understand the nature of these processes, we need to investigate how contemporary paid work is a culturally, socio-economically, and subjectively constituted phenomenon. Working life entails the processing of a variety of emotions like hope,

ambition, loss, need, joy, competition, love, and hate. But work also comprises performance assignments, competitive and collaborative relationships, forms of management, and gender games. This conglomeration of feelings, functions, and assessments is significant in the theory of psychoanalytic social psychology, condensed into the concept of 'the psychological economy' of paid work. Birgit Volmerg points out that this identifies structures and processes of crucial significance to the development and maintenance of the human ability to work. The social origins of the concept are not to be found in the alienated original structures of industrial production, but in the chiefly utilitarian value- and needs-related work of social reproduction (Volmerg, 1992).

In working life, a variety of traits from the development of individual life histories are activated through acts and meanings of individuals with different ego structures. Therefore, working life very much depends on how the individuals' egos are able to function. Working life particularly establishes settings that facilitate psychodynamic processes, in which impulse satisfaction may be possible in different modes (Leithäuser, 1976; Leithäuser and Volmerg, 1988). In work, object relationships and the conflicts and meanings linked to these are activated and played out. Working life also depends on how the ego is constructed, and work provides rich opportunities for human needs to be either met or frustrated. The fact that paid work can span a range of traits in individual life history development can be understood through the concept of displacement. Libidinous, narcissistic, and aggressive working needs are displaced by the individual to the tangible work itself and to work relationships with the aim of gratifying these needs. Thus, displacement frequently occurs within everyday social and working interaction. Displacement in psychodynamic terms refers to processes where emotional content from one specific context or situation is transferred to another situation or context, when only one element is shared between the original and the new situation.

Individualisation seeks to reflect the dialectic processes of individuals' subjectivity and identity and societal conditions. The concept of socialisation is pivotal, since it acts as an overall concept for individualisation and societal processes, thereby providing an understanding of socialisation processes and effects that a society has on its members (Leithäuser and Volmerg, 1988:55). When one applies this conceptual understanding to social workers, welfare systems and their recipients it leads to a contextualised analysis. Social workers, welfare systems and recipients are brought into a context that emphasises their historical origins and development. Social workers act and manage a socially and

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economically allocated welfare system that frames clients' possibilities to change their lives. Social work then embraces a number of complex societal and historical problems and the limited options to solve these falls heavily on the individual social worker in the shape of subjectified reactions like ambivalence, relinquishment or resignation. Individualisation could be seen as a systemic effect of modernisation leading to the individual experience of pathologisation and stigmatisation. The individual is de-politicised and disempowered by organisational processes of displacement whereby the social worker's experience is reduced to a personalised and privatised conflict (Andersen, 2005).

Summing up

In this article I have introduced a psycho-societal approach to the micro-processes of the Danish neoliberal welfare service. I point out how, on the one hand, numerous organisational, financial and cultural changes have provided more differentiated and efficient welfare services. On the other hand, I show that standardisation and quality assessment regulating daily work have led to a cross pressure on welfare professionals, distancing them from the voices and lives of vulnerable citizens. A psycho-societal reading of neoliberal welfare services aiming at efficiency and performance management shows that the result can be anxiety, defensiveness and ambivalence. I suggest that we base our approach on 'sticky constructions' as condensed points of meaning located in the many troubling encounters between welfare professionals and citizens, which will enable us to understand and learn from these. My contribution has been to suggest that identification, ambivalence and defence reactions constitute a significant psycho-societal analytical grid through which to study welfare services.

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