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Meaninglessness and powerlessness:
Alienation among welfare professionals in the digital public sector

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Abstract

Welfare professionals’ work practices are changing significantly, as public sectors across the world are undergoing extensive digital transformations. States roll out grand digitalization and automation projects with a promise of higher efficiency and better quality in the public sector. However, the extensive digital transformation also put welfare professionals’ sense of professionalism at stake. Based on 13 interviews with welfare professionals, we in this paper explore how they experience a sense of alienation in relation to the digitalization of their work. We identify two experiences of alienation: (1) meaninglessness: a lack of human connection and (2) powerlessness: a sense of forced ignorance. These experiences of alienation challenge the welfare professionals’ job satisfaction as well as how they assess the cases of the citizens.

Keywords: Digitalization, public sector, welfare professionals, alienation, digital inequality

Introduction

Across the world, states are becoming reliant on digital technologies and public sector organizations are undergoing extensive digital transformation (Margetts, 2009; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow & Tinkler, 2006). Bureaucratic structures, case-processing and state/citizens interaction are increasingly being digitalized and automated. This development has huge consequences for not only the citizens, but also the welfare professionals. Research indicates that digital strategies and new technologies can increase the experience of professional alienation among welfare professionals (Tummers, Bekkers & Steijn, 2009). However, exactly how alienation of welfare professionals is linked to digitalization needs further exploration. In
this paper, we therefore explore how the digitalization of the work of welfare professionals makes them feel a sense of estrangement and alienation in their relation to the citizens.

This paper is based on a qualitative study of digitalization efforts in the Danish public sector, focusing on the perspective of the welfare professionals. Denmark has several times been internationally commended for leading the e-government development, because of having a very extensive and ambitious digitalization strategy (see for instance, European Commission, 2018; United Nation, 2018). Thus, Denmark provides a useful exemplary case for understanding the challenges that occur in a highly digitalized public sector. In this paper, we call these ambitious digitalization projects into question, by pointing out overlooked consequences for both welfare professionals and citizens.

We first position the paper in relation to three strands of research. Research on (1) the digitalization of the public sector, (2) alienation of professionals and (3) digital inequality. Next, we introduce the Danish case and methods used. Subsequently, we present our analysis of the experiences of alienation among welfare professionals. By drawing on literature about policy alienation (Tummers et al., 2009), we identify two main experiences linked to digitalization of their work: meaninglessness: a lack of human connection and powerlessness: forced ignorance. Lastly, we discuss our main findings and identify new avenues yet to be explored.

Theoretical framework

The digital public sector

This paper builds upon previous endeavors exploring how digitalization reforms are reconfiguring public sector organizations (Schou and Hjelholt, 2018, 2019; Henman, 2010). Thus far, most research has focused on the digitalization of the public sector from a macro perspective, defining the structures and characteristics of so-called “e-government” or “digital
governance” (Margetts, 2009; Dunleavy et al. 2006). However, recent scholarship has stressed the need to apply a micro perspective and include the organizational context and situatedness, to better understand the consequences that the digital transformation practically has (Plesner et al., 2018; Pors, 2015). These studies have shown how the relation to the citizens is changing: the communication increasingly happens shoulder-to-shoulder via a screen rather than face-to-face (e.g., Pors, 2015; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002) and automation of the work processes might change how welfare professionals exercise discretion in their decision making (e.g., Justesen & Plesner, 2018; Petersen, Christensen & Hildebrandt, 2020). These changes are of great relevance, since the relation to citizens and professional discretion always have been essential functions of welfare professionals (Lipsky, 2010; O’Syllivan, 1999).

In this paper, we seek to showcase the ambition to include sensitivity to both digital governance characteristics as well as situated reports from welfare professionals: our point of departure is the interaction between welfare professionals and citizens, which we explore by contextualizing it within organizational and political structures.

**Alienation of welfare professionals**

Based on the changes mentioned above, digitalization can be assumed to entail new feelings of alienation among welfare professionals. To explore the sense of alienation, we particularly draw on Tummers, Bekker and Steijn’s (2009) theorization of *policy alienation*. Tummers et al. further developed Seeman (1959) and Blauers’ (1964) theories on *worker alienation*, arguing that there are important differences between the alienation processes in the public sector in comparison to the private sector (Tummers et al., 2009). Furthermore, there are differences between professionals in comparison to manual workers (ibid.). We in this paper draw on two dimensions of alienation suggested by Tummers et al. (2009): *policy meaninglessness* and
Policy meaninglessness refers to welfare professionals’ experience of whether the policy programs make purposeful contributions to their clients specifically or to society in a greater scale (ibid.). Policy powerlessness refers to the degree of influence and the experience hereof, which welfare professionals have over shaping new policy programs (ibid.). Tummers et al. (2009) already addressed that technologies might affect alienation processes. Nonetheless, they mainly focused on the influence of new public management strategies and did not pay much attention to digital reforms and technologies in their analysis. Additionally, digitalization of the public sector has since their study intensified. In view of this, this paper strives to provide new insights into how experience of alienation among welfare professionals is related to digitalization.

Digital Inequalities

Alongside the increasingly widespread use of digital technologies, new forms of digital divides and inequalities have emerged (Van Dijk, 2016; Norris, 2003, Mossberger et al, 2003; Eubanks, 2018). Of interest to this paper, digital inequalities have become key matters of concern for states and governments around the world. Under this rubric, an increasingly large body of research have documented how digital technologies may reproduce and consolidate social inequalities (Regneddda & Muschert 2013; Mossberger, 2009) and produce new forms of digital exclusion and stigmatization (Watling, 2011; Hjelholt, 2015).

Welfare professionals are key actors in a complex digital reconfiguration of the state/citizen relationship. They are important actors in assuring even the disadvantaged citizens are not being left behind. However, the increased digitalization has not only created new expectations and requirements to citizens (Jørring et al. 2019; Schou & Hjelholt, 2018), it has similarly ensued new expectations and requirements that alter work practices, meanings and
identities of welfare professionals (Pors, 2015; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). While early research on the digital divide often took “access” as its main variable, we follow a turn to study digital inequality as a matter of culture, social relations and usage (see e.g., DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Min, 2010; Selwyn, 2004). From here, we approach the altering state/citizen constellations from the perspective of the welfare professionals, as they attempt to follow legislation, provide services and help vulnerable citizens. Framing the digital divide as altering state/citizen constellations is in our view productive insofar it allows a view upon mundane transformations of “‘systems of thought’, legalities, infrastructures, practices, organizations and institutions” (Kitchin, 2014, p 185). Thus, we are supplementing existing approaches, with their attentiveness towards the multiplicity of social, cultural, political variables that may constrain or condition the digital divide(s) (James, 2011, Bagchi 2005, Ayanso et al. 2014).

Before we present our findings, we will in the following section briefly elaborate on the case and methods of this paper.

Case and methods

The Danish context

Since the mid-1990s, the Danish state has invested large amounts of resources in fully digitalizing the public sector (Schou & Hjelholt, 2019; Jæger & Löfgren, 2010). One of the biggest initiatives happened in November 2014, where it became mandatory for all Danish citizens to communicate with public authorities digitally\(^1\) (Henriksen, 2015). The digital infrastructure system called Digital Post became the official mail system through which state-citizen interaction should take place (ibid.). Consequently, citizens had to adopt the system if

\(^1\) Citizens can on own initiative apply to be exempted from the digital post.
they were to stay in contact with the public sector and assure to get welfare benefits provisioned. In the summer of 2018, the Danish government agreed on a new large-scale effort called Digital-ready Legislation, which is described as follows: “Future legislation must be drafted in a way that is both easily manageable and enables digital administration. Essentially, the aim of digital-ready legislation is a systematic debureaucratisation of the Danish public sector” (Agency of Digitisation, 04.01.2020). Thus, the digitalization of the Danish sector seems to keep accelerating. Making all new legislation “digital-ready” with the aim of debureaucratizing the public sector, must mean a continuously change of the functions of welfare professionals is on its way. For that same reason, it is important to understand both the opportunities and downsides of each step of digitalization.

Qualitative methods

This paper is exploratory and was a preliminary part of a broader study about the relation between socially vulnerable citizens and the digitalized public sector, in which both welfare professionals and citizens have been interviewed. In this paper we specifically zoom in on the experiences of the welfare professionals and the alienation processes they experience. The analysis of this paper is based on 13 semi-structured interviews with welfare professionals working in citizen service centers and state-financed drop-in centers, where citizens can find social support, information and get personal guidance in relation to the welfare system. The specific positions of the welfare professionals varied: some worked as at the street level mainly focusing on citizen interaction and casework. Whereas other had more managerial positions. However, common for all the welfare professionals was their focus on social work and citizen interaction. The interviews were conducted in 2018 - 2019 and followingly
transcribed and thematically coded for common themes. All quotes have been anonymized and translated from Danish to English by the authors.

**Experiences of alienation among Danish welfare professionals**

Our interviews demonstrated that many welfare professionals experience different kinds of alienation in their everyday work. We use Tummers et al.’s (2009) two concepts: *policy meaninglessness* and *policy powerlessness* to grasp and illustrate how digitalization of the work is linked to these experiences of alienation. We call the first experience of alienation *meaninglessness: a lack of human connection* and the second *powerlessness: forced ignorance*. We present each in turn.

**Meaninglessness: a lack of human connection**

Much public administration literature has stressed that a big part of welfare professionals’ professionalism is rooted in their ability to handle each citizen’s case with human discretion (Lipsky, 2010; Petersen et al., 2020). However, one can argue that welfare professionals’ space for action to provide individual welfare support is partly removed, as digital citizen self-service options have emerged, and case-proceedings increasingly are becoming automated. We found, that these changes can result in a sense of what Tummers et al. (2009) describe as *policy meaninglessness* among professionals: an experience of a lack of purposeful contributions to the citizens or society in a greater scale.

The interviewed welfare professionals expressed that they felt increasingly detached from the citizens. Although most of them argued that the digital changes and tools were very
useful, it also made them feel less connected to important social dimensions and purposes of their work. As one of the welfare professionals expressed: “I think the digital is exciting and smart, but there is just not this… The human connection kind of disappears”. Similarly, another welfare professional working mainly at the street level said: “my fear is that we will lose the human contact”. The decline in one-to-one communication created a feeling and fear of lack of human connection, which according to the interviewees had particular negative consequences for already disadvantaged citizens. One welfare professional, who worked at a managerial level, but also had years of experience in working directly with citizens, said:

“We sometimes think they [disadvantaged citizens] are left in the lurch. I think it might have to do with the fact, that when one sits so far away from the citizens, then one’s heart is not in it the same way, as when one is close to the citizens and can see their frustrations and how difficult it is. Because they just get told, you have to do it electronically and if you cannot do it, then you have to apply to be excepted.”

The quote illustrates different aspects of the experienced meaninglessness linked to a lack of human connection. The physical distance to the citizens affects welfare professionals’ sense of moral obligation towards the citizens, since they do not see the actual frustration and difficulties experienced by the citizens. Thus, digitalization risk removing an important human element in the case proceedings. Furthermore, the experience of leaving some citizens “in the lurch” reflects a sense of insufficiency, in terms of not helping the citizens, who are in greatest need of welfare support. As following welfare professional articulated, this sense of insufficiency and lack of purpose can lead to great frustration and decrease in job satisfaction.
“We are called a citizen service center. We are here to assist the citizens. The citizens are in focus [...] All of the sudden we have to cut the service, and I am not saying that the self-service is a bad service. But if we suddenly will not have time for the IT-weak, then it will also affect our well-being. That we can feel. We get frustrated and stuff like that, if we do not feel we have time and do not feel we have the possibility to help the ones, we believe we are supposed to be there for. That happens more and more. Sadly, that is what’s happening. Then we have to compromise, but we do not completely to so either.”

By stressing the place and purpose of her job with following words: “we are called a citizen service center. We exist for the citizens” she underlined that her relation to the citizen was pivotal for her role as a welfare professional. She experienced that maintaining this role got increasingly complicated, which affected her and other welfare professionals’ well-being. The welfare professional several of times articulated, that she would go beyond the barriers set by the system, so that she would not have to compromise completely with her beliefs. This was a recurring theme in many of the interviews. Most of the welfare professionals told, that they tried to find ways to help most citizens needing extra assistance, although they did not always have the time. It ended up being up to the individual welfare professional to make this decision of how and when to put in the extra effort. These different tasks might not be a part of their official work portfolio and can lead to the welfare professional not living up to the expected efficiency of the organization. This nonetheless calls for another study of the emergence, displacement, (de)valuation of work tasks due to digital transformation.
Powerlessness: forced ignorance

The welfare professionals mentioned a loop hole in the new digital system, which creates a sense of powerlessness among them (Tummers et al., 2009). They explained that many especially socially vulnerable citizens need help from someone else in order to use the digital self-service solutions of the public organizations. This means that a number of the registered users are in fact a kind of pseudo users, in the sense that they do not use their Digital Signature or check their Digital Post themselves. Instead, family members, friends, volunteers or bartenders read the mails, apply for housing benefits or log in on the required job portal. People are not allowed to use each others digital citizen accounts, however, the welfare professionals felt forced to ignore the problem, so that case proceedings can run smoothly for both the state and the citizens. As one welfare professional said:

“What happens today is – and no-one talks about, but everyone knows it – it is that everyone exploits each other’s Nem-IDs [the Danish digital signature that allow citizens to use the online self-service solutions]. ‘I have my mother’s, sister’s or my daughter’s’. That is how it works all the time. It is because there still has not been developed some kind of authorization, which says ‘I hereby give you the right to, on my behalf, apply for social benefits’ or something like that. Therefore, the daughter will use the mothers’ Nem-ID and apply for housing benefits. We know it. It happens. But no-one really talks about it”

As many other welfare professionals, this interviewee explained that many people would apply for welfare benefits on each other’s behalf. The interviewee repeatedly said “no-one talks about it, but everyone knows it”, indicating an awareness about the problem, but a sense of forced
ignorance. Although there exist different types of digital authorizations, which citizens can give to others, it can only be used for specific purposes and under specific case. This did not seem to work sufficiently. Another welfare professional also noted that the problem often let to relatives of citizens to contact them, not knowing what to do:

*In the research you are doing, do you ever talk to the relatives? Because some seniors might be vulnerable, however, we very often have relatives on the line in the citizen service, where they find it uncomfortable to take over their mother and father's EasyID, accounts and e-Boks. On that point, I do think we need some knowledge sharing in society, about how we can do it in a proper way.*

This quote clearly shows, that the problems goes beyond the welfare professionals being concerned with themselves and how they are being put in a predicament, where they feel powerless and forced to behave like they are ignorant to the problems of the citizens. They also see relatives of vulnerable citizens, who are struggling with both the legal and emotional questions of using another person’s digital citizen accounts.

This dependence on informal assistance from the civil society is problematic for three apparent reasons: Firstly, people who do not have social resources risk getting completely excluded. Secondly, the *pseudo users* create a false impression of success of the digital self-service solutions, which on a political level can lead to a narrowing of ambitions and downgrading of welfare services. Thirdly, it creates greater risk of identity theft and fraud, which can harm both citizens and the state. However, the interviewed welfare professionals felt incapable of doing something about the is
Discussion

This paper is exploratory and we cannot make grand generalization based on our analysis. Nonetheless, it provides useful insights into the digitalization of public sector organizations and enable us to identify points for attention and relevant avenues for future research.

In our analysis of interviews with Danish welfare professionals, we draw on Tummers et al.’s (2009) alienation concepts policy meaninglessness and policy powerlessness. We identify two complementary alienation experiences, which we name meaninglessness: a lack of human connection and powerlessness: forced ignorance. The interviewees generally felt positive towards using new technologies, but also felt it led to an increased human disconnect, insufficiency and ethical problems related to their core tasks as welfare professionals. We argue that these experiences of professional alienation should be taken seriously, as they can have a number of negative consequences on both an individual and structural level. The feeling of alienation can affect the job satisfaction among welfare professionals (Tummers, 2012), the quality of interaction between professionals and citizens (Bekkers et al., 2007) and the effectiveness of the policy programs (Tummers, 2009).

Based on our findings, we wish to highlight two main dimensions that need further exploration. Firstly, this paper indicates that welfare professionals due to the extensive digitalization reforms experience increased difficulties reaching disadvantaged citizens; such as vulnerable elders. Thus, it is important to also include the perspective of disadvantaged citizens to get a holistic understanding of the problems emerging from fully digitalizing the public sector. Currently, the Danish digital self-service solutions are based on a standardized “one size fit all” principle. However, our findings show that the solutions clearly do not fit all.

Secondly, this paper shows that welfare professionals increasingly feel disconnected to the citizens and that many citizens get informal welfare assistance outside the public sector. But
from whom and in which ways? More research is needed about how digitalization projects in the public sector relocate main welfare tasks, and what consequences this might have.

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**Literature**


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