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Stories Of Professionalization And Social Inclusion In Public Parking Services

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Introduction

This paper presents stories from fieldwork among parking patrol officers and managers in a Danish municipal centre. The stories are about the hiring, firing and retention of parking officers. The centre is renowned for management's active and ambitious work to improve the work environment for parking patrol officers, the quality of parking services and to employ diversity management. As many other types of unskilled work in Denmark, the job as parking patrol officer is a possible entry point to the labour market for people without formal education or people who have been worn out in other occupations.

By presenting stories told by parking patrol officers and their managers at Centre for Parking, I wish to contribute to our understanding of the role of the public sector as an employer: the ambitions and limits of the public sector in regard to employing people for unskilled work and the dilemmas that follow. The aim of the paper is to show how these stories shape the simultaneous processes of professionalizing the traditionally unskilled work of parking patrolling and fulfilling a role as a socially inclusive workplace.

Background

The Danish public sector accounts for around 30 percent of Danish employment (Danmarks Statistik, 2011) and as an employer, the public sector is traditionally a central actor when it comes to alleviating problems of unemployment. Besides including people in subsidized jobs, the Danish public sector has a history of creating jobs for people on the edge of the labour market. This has particularly taken place within the care sector, but also recruitment to the job as a parking officer can be seen as part of this so-called 'vacuum-cleaning' (Labriola & Lund 2009) of the labour market.

In the Danish context, the job as a parking patrol officer is highly stigmatized. Therefore, the parking patrol officers, who charge car-drivers for their illegal parking, have quite a psychologically strain-full job. This work environment challenge has only increased as the municipality in recent years has developed a strict policy in regard to parking, increased the enforcement of parking rules and increased the prices for parking very much. Yet, the job as parking patrol officer is popular and the centre receives many applications (600 for 10 vacancies) for these jobs.

Fieldwork

My empirical material consists of field notes from 15 1-day shadowings (Czarniawska 2007) of parking officers during their everyday work, qualitative interviews with five managers in the centre, one shop steward and three parking patrol officers. I was a participant-observer for three days of job interviews and on selected days during a three-week introduction course.

Stories

The stories presented in this paper developed spontaneously during the course of an interview or during my talks with the patrol officers while I shadowed them. The latter talks were quoted from memory in my fieldnotes. Stories are traditionally understood as narratives, ordered around a plot. The main characteristics of narratives are, that they are chronological, meaningful and social (Elliot 2005: 5-12). A plot involves the passage from one equilibrium over a disturbing force, or happening, to a new equilibrium (Czarniawska 2004: 17-19). This paper does not explicitly identify these elements in the presented stories, but focuses on how stories *link* (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 55-67) issues of social inclusion and workplace retention to skills. In these stories, my interlocutors exercise the power of narrative to situate themselves and others – they make sense of their own identity and work on the scripts for other's roles (Czarniawska 1997; Czarniawska 2004). By looking at stories, we can learn about the repertoire of identities and the exercise of power in relation workplace retention and skills. We can follow the creation of meaning when managers and employees reflect upon matters of importance to socially inclusive workplace initiatives.

Stories from Centre for Parking

The first story primarily relies on an interview with the work environment consultant in the Centre. I treat it as a collective story of the organization (Elliot 2005:166) as I have met the same line and content of this story in my conversations with many other persons in the organization – employees as well as managers. The collective story serves to draw up a collective understanding of the history of the organization. Next, I present shorter stories through quotes from interviews and fieldnotes.

A collective story of transformation

Central to management and employees at the centre, is a collective story about the development of the centre from a de facto labour market retention project for worn-out, elderly bus-drivers to a modern workplace for skilled parking officers, in which management is very competent in regard to handling issues of diversity and retention in the workforce.

The first person I met and talked to at The Centre for Parking was the work environment consultant. Her job functions primarily regard human resource management. She has no formal managerial power, but considers herself as an

intermediary between the employees and management. In an interview, she tells me the following story: about ten years ago, things were going very badly in this municipal centre. Employees didn't really work, they experienced loads of harassments on the street, and there was a very high illness rate: about 40 days per officer per year. But then came a new centre-manager who tightened up the organization. Being a former police officer, he had a very good understanding of the work as a parking officer. One of the first things he did was to make sure that the uniforms were changed from green uniforms, signaling environmental friendliness, to dark uniforms resembling police uniforms. The work environment consultant links the uniforms directly to the parking-officers' self-confidence; contributing a drastic fall in the amount of harassments to these new dark uniforms.

In this transformation process an external consultancy company was hired to go through the organization. The consultancy report concluded that the employees were 'in lack of care'. This conclusion resulted in a series of projects and initiatives to improve the work environment, for example a project named: "self-confidence replaces absence" and systematic courses in conflict management, to prepare the officers to tackle conflicts on the street. Today, absence due to illness is reduced to around 20 days per officer per year.

Woven into this story of transformation are initiatives to recruit according to principles of diversity management, to make use of various types of subsidized jobs, and to use so-called round-table talks with employees, who are in risk of lo~~o~~sing their job because of illness, abuse or other circumstances.

Hiring & Firing

The next story is about hiring procedures related to diversity management. In Denmark, diversity management has primarily been used in relation to the integration of an ethnically diverse workforce and has often merged with corporate social responsibility (Boxenbaum 2006; Kamp & Hagedorn Rasmussen 2004). Unskilled work is often an entry point to the Danish labour market, as illustrated in the following quote from a former manager of the parking officers:

'They [the parking officers] ask me, what is the future for me? And I say: your future is not to be a parking patrol officer forever. The future is, that when you come here, with another ethnic background, you have the possibility within a year or two, to document that you are able to keep a job, to fill out a job, you pay your taxes – because they want permanent residence or citizenship … but then I hope you will go looking for another job, because most of them are way too qualified for the job as parking officer... you can also get a recommendation from here, but most importantly: you get an understanding of what Danish worklife is about' (Interview with manager in the technical department)

According to this story, the meaning of holding the job is to become more employable in other jobs. The manager does not expect or wish to keep the employees for too long but rather to help them on to another more qualified job. This manager also tells me about her experience with diversity management as a series of experiments and a long line of individual stories with mostly happy endings. But the following story of the hiring of a transvestite tells us about the limits of hiring:

‘’The job centre asked if we could take Catherine in for a jobtest. We said: there is nothing we can’t do…[but] It was too big a challenge. After we had had Catherine half a year [in the technical department], the shop steward came and said: I have to tell you, it doesn’t work. We had Catherine with us on the street, but .. you know, big breasts and pearl necklaces and wig. There were too many comments [from people on the street]... So I said to Catherine: Catherine, I simply have a problem letting you out on the street because we attract too much attention… and I can’t guarantee the safety – neither for you nor your colleague.’ (Interview with manager in the technical department)

The manager concludes: ‘’But we gave Catherine half a year in the labour market, where we did what we could to find out what the obstacles were for her to stay here….. but at the same time, I felt: Damn’ it, it didn’t work… after a while, you want to be challenged by the ultimate, right? But, I have to say, that was a defeat…’ (Interview with manager in the technical department)

The story shows how the manager has a personal ambition to try out all sorts of ‘characters’ among her employees – she attributes personal satisfaction to this part of her work. According to the story, the limit to her experimentation is the security of other employees.

Retention & Firing

As regards firing, two types of grounds for firing are particularly prevalentiling in my empirical material. The managers of the parking patrol officers point to the parking officers’ willingness to cooperate in a new organizational structure, which has meant more responsibility delegated from managers to work teams. But the work environment consultant articulates another ground for firing: in efforts to keep an employee, who is at the risk of dropping out of the labour market, it is crucial that this employee is ready to cooperate in these efforts. If not, they may have to fire the employee. The different perspectives in two stories about retention told by the work environment consultant and a parking officer illustrate the complexities of this process:

Given that the physical and psychological harassment from disgruntled car-drivers and others on the street is a major strain in the work environment, it is a part of efforts to prevent illness, to make the parking officers able to face these challenges

and to follow up on those officers who experience assaults. The work environment consultant is eager to offer managerial care and attention as a remedy to solve the individual parking officer's problem – as we have seen illustrated in the collective story above. This type of care has meant attention to the parking patrol officers' record of assaults, i.e. how often they report having experienced critical instances on the street. The work environment consultant talks about 'repeaters': Parking officers who tend to experience harassments more often than others. The story goes that this is because the particular parking officer is not good at tackling harassments calmly. She tells us about the "repeaters":

''We have had some, who have repeatedly been assaulted, and usually there are reasons for this. It is because they have…some psychological problems from many years back, which come up when they are angry or afraid, when they meet an angry car-driver. We simply hire some external psychologists for them, so they get a proper debriefing. They get built up again, so that they can face the job. And it has actually helped. We use that a lot.' (Interview with work environment consultant)

A parking patrol officer told me another story. He told me about two assaults, which he experienced in 'Trouble Street': a street which is renowned as a bad area with many aggressive car-drivers. I knew from my shadowing of other parking officers, that many of them refused to patrol in this area although management wanted them to. After reporting the assaults, the parking officer felt an uncomfortable focus on him and his psychological condition from the managers he had at the time. He now worried, that the attention could lead to a firing:

'I used to be one of those who reported everything. I am not scared of the assaults, but of the management, that my name comes up again. I don't want to register cars without number plates [which means extra contact with the managers] and I don't want to be a mentor for new officers. I have made an agreement with my new manager, that I just don't report any assaults… I am afraid of loosing my job. But it also has a lot to do with where in town you are…' (Fieldnotes from shadowing parking officer)

By doing what management values, namely patrolling in a dangerous street, he puts himself at risk and when this action, which is in line with the values of the organisation, by 'fate' leads to a series of assaults, his actions are not recognized as appropriate by management. While management signals that they want employees to patrol in Trouble Street, they apparently don't really expect it. In the parking officer's story, we can recognize a double-bind problem (Bateson 1972; Gudiksen 2007): He describes how he is trapped in a situation where the managers express two messages where one denies the other: 'we want to support you by giving you psychological counseling' vs. 'if you need too much psychological counseling, you are not suitable for the job'. He is also trapped between: 'we want you to be

flexible and patrol in all areas of town – including the troublesome areas' and 'if you become a person with repeated assaults we may have to fire you'. According to his story, the parking officer is in a tragic position, where he cannot comment on the messages. His position is low in the workplace-hierarchy and he is afraid, that attention will disturb his employment relation.

Concluding

The collective story of the organisation pointed to the simultaneous processes of increased professionalization of the work done at Centre for Parking and the increased focus on social responsibility. The process of professionalization has focused on care for the employees – particularly with attention to their psychological abilities. What used to be a light job, now carries responsibilities, larger requests for quality, but also larger requests for managing one's own personality. In retention efforts, the employee must be willing to work on his or her psychological qualities. In recruitment, the stories presented here show a manager that describes herself as quite powerful in terms of allowing people into the labour market. In her stories, the limits to recruitment do not have to do with quality of services, but with the care for other employees' secure work environment.

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