

Screen-level Bureaucracy:

Organizational Encounters in the Digitized and Automated World

Organizer: Kelly McKowen, Princeton University

By: Julie Rahbæk Møller, Associate Professor, Metropolitan University College, Copenhagen, Denmark**Digitalizing Social Work in Denmark**

Throughout the twentieth century, the Welfare State of Denmark has gradually overtaken a substantial part of the responsibilities formerly inherent in family relationships and local communities. This has enabled the individual to be financially independent of family and network, and instead more dependent of the state. *From cradle to grave* is the common description. For decades, community and solidarity as the foundation of a safe existence have characterized the Danish Welfare State. However, since the 1990s, this has been problematized (see fx Rose 1996), and in Denmark it has led to a shift from the Welfare State's focus on stability and community to a focus on dynamic development and a lower degree of dependency between citizens and *the competition state* as the Danish political scientist Ove Kaj Pedersen describes it (2011). Consequently, there is an increasing use of digitalization in the public sector. Experiments are made on using robots in elder care; we have a system called Citizen.dk with all of our personal information from the latest doctor's appointment to our student loans, and finally yet importantly unemployed people and caseworkers engage more with each other through complicated digitalized systems than with each other physically.

Drawing from fieldwork amongst marginalized people and social workers in Copenhagen, this paper will explore how digitalization as a substitute for personal encounters create a discrepancy between bureaucratic conceptions of more effective and low cost means to perform social work on the one side, and marginalized peoples' conceptions – or expectations – of the welfare state as a form of 'extended family' (eg. Bohannan & Bohannan 1968) on the other side. It also points to a discrepancy between Danish citizens wish for stability in a society that has a growing focus on creating dynamic development and independent citizens.

The fieldwork took place in a red light district of Copenhagen, in an organization called *The Settlement*. It's founded in the early nineteen hundreds and is originally based on Christian community work, but today it collaborates with the municipalities who refer unemployed marginalized people to such organizations with the objective of getting them a job in the ordinary labor market. A difficult task due to the fact that most of them have a psychiatric diagnosis, a heavy use of alcohol or drugs and for some of them no place to live. They are on the edge of what Guy Standing refers to as *the precariat* (Standing 2009). They are not working and the most likely places they would find work is characterized by insecurity and precariousness.

Case of Selma and Ellen

Let me start with a case. In the winter of 2015, I was doing fieldwork amongst the users of the Settlement – as well as amongst the social workers and caseworkers that are part of their daily lives. I assisted a woman called Selma in her endeavor to get cash benefit. The case illustrates which spaces of contact open and close when digitalization has replaced a substantial part of the communication between citizens and the people working within the system. Selma is in her late 50ties and her main problem is drinking too much for weeks and months at a time making it difficult for her to be part of a workplace. Her CV is long and interesting, but she hasn't been working for more than 10 years. Her latest attempt was studying to become a social- and health assistant, but she dropped out. Consequently, she needs cash benefit to uphold her life. When talking to her she was utterly lost in a system of bureaucratic procedures and a vast number of caseworkers from different departments who sent her letters and reminders and demanded of her a digital knowledge she did not possess.

Our first task was to scan some documents in order to send by email to a municipal **office** – not a person. Selma does not own a scanner – or a computer – so we used the one in a nearby corner shop. With some efforts, we succeeded to scan to her email and then we had to forward the documents using a computer at The Settlement. The forgotten password to her email was an obstacle as well as finding the correct email for the municipal office. About a week later, she received by post a letter of notification to attend a meeting at the Job Center. We went together thinking we would meet a caseworker. Instead, we were met by a security guard who showed us to a computer from where Selma had to fill out several forms and attach files she did not have. When we were finished, the guard checked the screen and approved.

A few weeks later, she had not heard any news, and we started making calls to different caseworkers who guided us around the system – sometimes back and forth between each other. Most often, I did the talking with Selma sitting next to me either crying or swearing. A caseworker told us, that they did not receive the forms. We walked to the Job Center once more and filled them out again. Following this, we again talked to a vast number of caseworkers with different forms of responsibility for her case: her health status, her right to receive cash benefit, paying out the cash benefit and so forth. It was not clear to us who made decisions on what, but they asked for more documents such as old bills, tax papers, bank statements etc. They only had access to the digital system concerning their own area of responsibility and not until I got hold of a head of office who had access to several digital systems and who took mercy on us, did we succeed in our quest for cash benefit. It took us about a month and a half while Selma gradually became more and more fragile and went on a bender lasting several weeks afterwards. Selma's goal in life is not to receive social income from the State, but to obtain stability in life, financially as well as socially.

Especially one of the caseworkers, Ellen, stressed Selma by her many questions and requests on the phone. We couldn't get a meeting with her, because her office does not engage in personal contact with clients. However, she did agree on an interview with me. On the phone, her voice was sharp and she had been relentless in her demand for documents, but meeting with her gave me an entirely different impression. She was kind and empathic, and in explaining, how the system works, she called it: "A closed shop with no personal access". Digitalization has replaced the physical interaction with the citizens, and thus she communicates with clients via telephone, skype or email. In her point of view, this has not had the intended effect of making clients more independent. She says that some issues she would be able to deal with right away in a personal meeting because it would be obvious how many resources, the clients have and thus which kind of help is needed.

Ellen explains that differentiated social work has been lost in digitalization and today cases management is uniform – all clients are treated the same way regardless of their different needs. Each case is managed and outcome decided from written forms based mainly on documents even though Ellen and her colleagues are aware that some clients are worse off than others are. Moreover, clients' opportunity to argue their case has been limited. In Ellen's point of view, digitalization has not resulted in procedures that are more effective, but there has been a shift in responsibility of the citizens from the practitioners of the Welfare State and to private organizations collaborating with State institutions – such as The Settlement.

For decades ethnography of the Scandinavian Welfare States have emphasized values such as equality, egalitarian individualism, community and solidarity as key concepts (see fx. Gullestad 1992), but it seems like new concepts are needed in explaining the formation of the State and its relation to the citizens (Bruun, Krøijer og Rytter 2016).

Development and stability

The case of Selma shows us not only the frustrations that arise when marginalized people engage with bureaucratic digitalized systems, but on a higher note it points to a discrepancy between citizens' wish for financial and social stability on the one side – and on the other side the State's stipulation of a dynamic development and independence from the Welfare State.

Stability has changed from being a fundamental value to an illegitimate wish to maintain citizens in dependency of the State – including people with complex social problems who are not part of the ordinary labor market. Anthropological research in different areas within the Danish Welfare State points to a society that is torn between those who are part of the labor market and display an appropriate amount of independence – and those who are unemployed or will not show sufficient initiative to be part of the labor

market. These groups of people, such as homeless, unemployed, mentally ill, handicapped, substance users, refugees etc., are being marginalized and to a certain extent they feel and are perceived as outcasts and stagnated (Bruun, Krøijer & Rytter 2016: 29).

Another way of explaining this is by turning to the anthropological concept 'liminality' originally developed by Arnold van Gennep (1909) and further developed by Victor Turner (1967) in his studies of rituals and rites. In this context, liminality serves to show the transition between working and being unemployed. It seems like the numerous political reforms in the labor market area combined with the shift from the State's focus on stability to enhancing dynamic development has resulted in a blind angle in relation to marginalized people with more problems than unemployment.

The logic behind these political reforms is that unemployment is a temporary crisis you have to go through in order to return to the ordinary labor market and thus a legitimate position in society. For many people this would be the case, but for marginalized groups, unemployment is not a temporary state but a symptom of other problems, which cannot be solved bureaucratically by economic incentives or by using complex digital systems. In an organizational as well as identity context, liminality indicates that a potentially better life is awaiting these people on the other side – and thus a greater independence of the Welfare State. But there seems to be a lack of acknowledgement of the chronicity in marginalized people's condition of life. Even though a crisis is mostly perceived as a temporary condition, for a great many people it is well rooted in life (Vigh 2008). The people described in this paper is living in a constant fear of losing control over their substance abuse, of losing their home (if they have one), of losing each other because their social network is fragile, and of losing their cash benefit due to technological difficulties.

The invisibility in the liminal phase, as described by Turner, is characterized by being *betwixt and between* – the persons are no longer classified as what they were and not yet classified as what they will become (Turner 1967: 96). The difference between the marginalized people of Copenhagen and the Ndembu people, from Turners work, is that the former does not have a safe route back to society. Or put in a different way: there is not an unambiguous idea of what their position in society ought to be if they cannot work.

Conclusion

The British anthropologist Richard Jenkins wrote in his monography "Being Danish" that Danes to a high degree accepts the State's interference – as we would with a watchful neighbor. We are provided with numbers at birth, we have a name law – and generally, our identities from birth are created through State

institutions directly or indirectly. Danes have accepted this because in many ways it is beneficial (Jenkins 2011). The technological presence has become a part of this interference. It has changed the way we relate to each other and to organizations and institutions, but for marginalized people with a fragile social network, the Welfare State, by way of its street-level bureaucrats, has transformed from being a form of *extended family* that offers social and financial security to a more distant and impersonal system – a screen-level bureaucracy. A transformation that also challenges caseworkers' ideals of practicing social work and their self-perception in relation to the citizens they are obligated to help.

Technology and care are often perceived as essentially different domains: rationality and alienation opposite the warmth and dedication of care. This also seems to be the case in my studies of digitalization and social work. However, a recent study of the development and use of robots in the Danish elder care, finds that robots can be of help to demented and mentally handicapped people, but as a double-edged sword with hopes and optimism on one side and anxiety and ethical dilemmas on the other side (Leeson 2017:262). Thus, different studies of technology in a Welfare context point to various effects of trust and mistrust, of transparency and opacity and of a sense of belonging to the Welfare State. It is therefore important that we, as anthropologists, examine technological processes in its different organizational contexts. Perhaps the tension field between *stability* and *dynamics* are more relevant today as analytical concepts than those of *egalitarianism*, *equality*, and *solidarity* if we are to understand how technology interferes with the relations between the individual and the state.