Danish University Colleges

Examining social work with children and youth in welfare service organizations observed as hybrids

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International conference: Hybrids - Observed with Social Systems Theory

Dubrovnik May 15th – 18th, 2014

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore social work as it can be observed in the welfare service organizations of Danish municipalities, specifically within the context of social work concerned with the protection of the child at risk. The paper uses the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann to elaborate and explore how social work within the specific frame of child protection care becomes an actual hybrid (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2012).

The paper recognizes social work as a social system, the system for help in society (Baecker, 1994) (Nissen, 2010). The paper sets out to explore how structural coupling within the welfare system of child protection can be said to emerge into a different form than (maybe) other welfare services. The explorative curiosity rises from recognition of the economic systems expansion and dominant semantics within social services, specifically child protection and how social workers may and may not refer to this as potential conflict using semantics of conflict. Welfare technologies as for instance the law stipulated "child conversation", budget control and action plans form the preliminary basis of the decision-making process of a so-

cial intervention regarding a child, but how do these help-programs interact and are codified within the hands of the social worker, working in the emerging hybrid of child protection care?

Social work viewed through the system theoretical lens.

The following seeks to explore social work within the frame of child protection in the context of the Danish welfare state and how looking through the lens of systems theory may or may not bring forth new perspectives to take into consideration for social workers and further research in field. But before we throw ourselves into the ocean in order to find an airborne lifeboat[1], we'll take a look at the system for help in the functionally differentiated society.

Social work is here recognized as a social system, with the function of social inclusion into society. Social work operates through the distinction of help/not-help (Baecker, 1994) however social work operates in the paradox that not-helping may be helping at the same time (Wirth, 2009). However this is conditioned by reflection as Maria Appel Nissen discusses in her book on new horizons in social work (Nissen, 2010)

Several literatures on the essence of social work, reflects on the ability and normative value of recognizing the whole person, client and now citizen just as the procedural law stipulates that all possibilities for help within the context of the welfare service organizations must be examined. Hence the law as well as the ethical code of conduct of social workers underscores a holistic approach, which might be challenged in a system theoretical view. When acknowledging social work as a function-system of society, it is the functional code of help/not-help which is the operational observation of the system of help in society. This challenges the massive literature and textbooks which set out to explain *what* social

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[1] Yes – this is a rather odd Foucault/Luhmann metaphor.

work is – i.e. a first order observation, and shifts the observation in a system theoretical view to a second order observation: How is social work recognized as social work? How do the organizational systems facilitate inclusion and exclusion when observing the child at risk? Hereby we shift focus from the field of social work i.e. an objective non-contingent observation of the horizon of meaning in social work to expectations of multiple implicit as well as explicit reflections communicated within the complexity of social systems.

The focus of this paper is to examine the possible hybrid form of welfare service organizations observing the child at risk. This will be done on the basis of two research questions:

First question of first order: do the organizational systems oriented towards help emerge into a third –hybrid- form?

Second question of second order: How does an organizational hybrid- not solely oriented towards well-established systems- observe the child at risk?

The purpose of the paper thus is to reflect upon possible new perspective on social problems and the complexity of help in society.

A very short chapter on aspects of inclusion and exclusion and the construction of meaning

The concept of inclusion and exclusion refers according to Luhmann to the concept of society (Luhmann, 2002). The concepts are bounded through the normative measurable parameters society sets for itself e.g. The Constitution, human rights, the right of the child, different observations on citizenship (Luhmann, 2002, p. 136).

The conditions for inclusion and exclusion vary within the different societies of society (Luhmann, 1999) (Luhmann, 2002) and in the functional differentiated society the premises of inclusion and exclusion are linked to the social systems. Each system communicates its own conditions for inclusion without consideration of the other systems conditions for inclusion and exclusion, just as welfare

service organizations construct and operates in compliances with the organizations own criteria for inclusion and exclusion (Luhmann, 2002). I will not embark further into the field of inclusion and exclusion but refer to Jan Inge Jönhill for additional reading (Jönhill, 2012).

Meaning is constructed on the horizon of three interlinked dimensions: Fact, time and sociality (Luhmann, 2000). The dimensions construct meaning through the distinctions of this and something else, before and after and ego and alter ego (Luhmann, 2000, pp. 114-122). In reality it is not meaningful to separate the dimensions: we acknowledge something, it is this and not something else we acknowledge, we acknowledge now but attributed the past or the future in recursive acknowledgment, and finally we acknowledge within this horizon of meaning and non-other.

Hence meaning exist in the relationship between what is and what might be, which again is a recursive construction linked to what is. The point I'm here trying to make is, that the three dimensions of meaning, may give us a reflexive tool in order to irritate common-sense and truism and by decomposing, what cannot be decomposed find ways of analyzing, what works for whom, when, under which circumstances.

After this light introduction to a part of the theoretical foundation of this paper, we will now turn to the topic of concern: the child at risk.

Child protection observed by the organizations of the welfare state

Protecting the child from its environment or protecting the environment from the child is in a Danish context organized within the municipalities and the respective department of children and families. In the mid 1990 elements of New Public Management (NPM) and NPM-like reforms was implemented to challenge the traditional bureaucratic rationale, which was said to dominate the organizational structure of the municipality. An orientation towards measurable goals, quantified performance indicators and a transparent and free market sat

the boundaries also in the departments of children and families. Cost accounting and spreadsheets have become part of the daily routine of the social worker engaged in child protection. However there is an apparel lack of research on how the municipal welfare organizations and social workers implement and handle these post-bureaucratic rationales specifically with in the field of child protection as well as a lack of research on the possible consequences for the child and family at risk. Exceptions to the rule are research by Maria Appel Nissen (Nissen, 2010) from a systems theoretical point of view and Ida Marie Schrøder (Schrøder, 2012) from an Actor-network theory point of view.
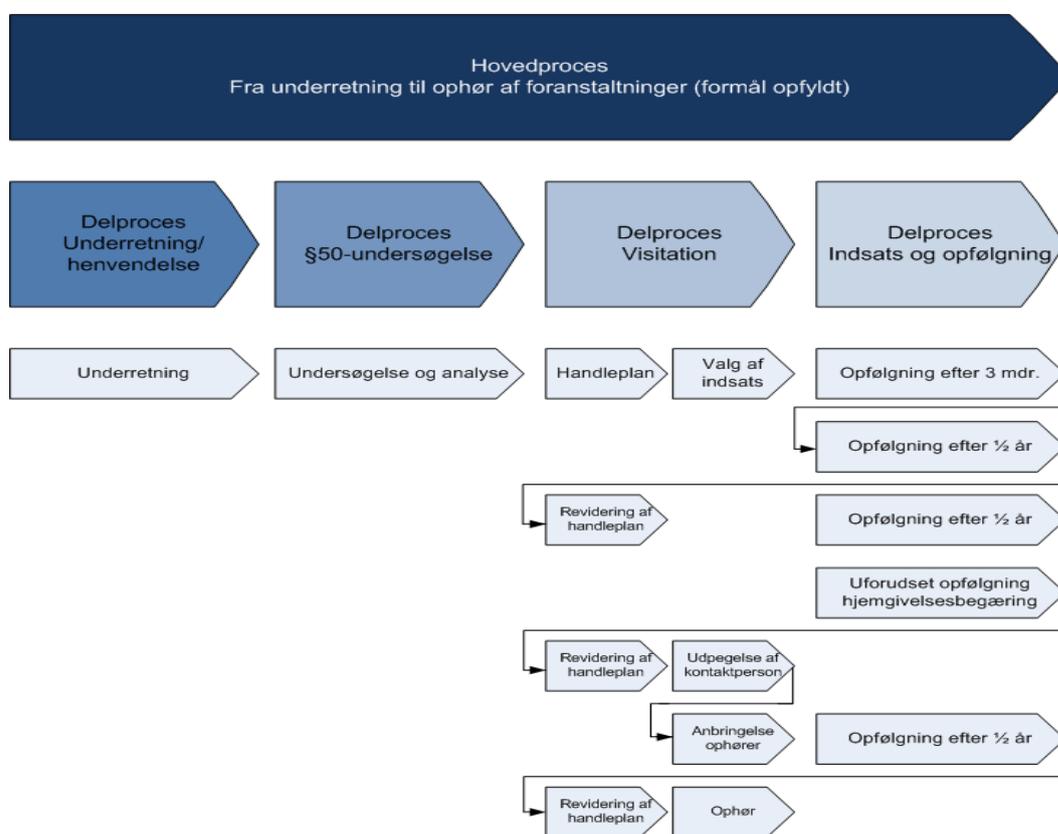
In the International Review of Administrative Sciences 2014, Emery and Giauque states that the post-bureaucratic welfare organization and public administration is characterized by the clash of multiple values and trends from the private and the public sector, all of which lead the authors to conclude that public administration emerges in a hybrid form blurring the lines between the public and the private sector, hence reconstructing itself in a new third – hybrid – form (Emery & Giauque, 2014). I will later elaborate on this specifically in the context of municipal child protection.

Governing the child

Child welfare legislation is carried out through the governing bodies of 98 municipalities of Denmark; each local body has a high degree of autonomy when implementing child welfare legislation and organization linked to the administrative aspect of the law. Recently a number of reforms have hit the child welfare area. The "Children's reform" was implemented in Jan. 2011 and stresses the purpose of providing support to disadvantage children and youth, in order to ensure the same possibilities of personal growth, health and an independent adult life as their peers. This must be ensured through continuity in the upbringing, a safe caring environment, stable relations to adults, personal growth, support in education, promoting health and finally preparing for an independent adult life (Servicestyrelsen, 2011) outlined in the Consolidation Act on Social Services, Art. 46. Based on a family's approach for help or a notification on a

child at risk – maltreatment and/or abuse, it is the main responsibility of the municipality to ensure an individual assessment of the needs of each child at risk is conducted. This is referred to as an Article 50 investigation, which in short describes and analyses a child's life in regards to areas such as: family, school, health, leisure time and friendships/network. The perspective of the parents as well as the child must be brought into the investigation and a conversation with the child "the child conversation" must take place, unless there are significant circumstances which speak against it as e.g. the age of the child or mental health etc. This should ideally be followed by the mandatory action plan, with presumably measurable expected outcome, and eventually an intervention. In the case of an investigation according to Article 50 and a following intervention, the role of the municipality and the social worker and/or the public employee is to implement preventive measures or out-of home placement with or without parental consent (Servicestyrelsen, 2011).

The following figure 1 is an exemplary model of the process of child investigation (in Danish):

From the mid-1990s Danish municipalities faced a growth in the expenditures of child protection of more than 100%. In the municipality of Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark with app. 324.000 inhabitants as per January 2014, the expenditures within the child protection system rose from per capita app. 640 € in 1993 to app. 2132 € in 2013.

This might come across as a well-functioning welfare system, with a tight knitted social net - however in comparison to other Nordic countries the interventions in a Danish context seemed more intrusive and more expensive with e.g. a larger number of children in out-of-home placement. The area of child protection was in general terms defined as un-governable. As society experienced a shift in economy – the new economic transition – the municipalities were fined, did they go over budget e.g. due to unforeseen expenditures regarding child protection. At the same time the municipalities were faced with zero growth on the local budgets. This all in all led to a strong focus on financial control regarding the expenditures within child protection and a shift in semantics from un-governable to difficultly-governable[2].

An NPM-like element implemented in the Municipality of Aarhus, as in many other municipalities, has been the *"Ordering - Executing - Consuming model" (OEC-model)*. The model seeks to split up the former double role of the municipality, as both the contractor and the contracted into a cleaner cut distinction between the municipality as contractor and the intervention e.g. care facilities chosen as the contracted.

The logics of the OEC-model is partly linked to the ones of market and management, but also the specialized therapeutically knowledge of the contracted plays an extensive role in what is known as the *modified OEC-model* within the department of children and families (Klausen, 2001).

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[2] I thought of using the term: Quasi-governable. However, this has somewhat different connotations than the semantically construction used. Hence: Difficultly-governable

The modified OEC-model draws on elements which are NPM-like when it comes to buyer-seller relations, competition, out-put focus, performance related pay-systems, strategic management and TQM (Klausen, 2001). However the market-like competition of the commercial world clashes and becomes a quasi-market in the civic world of Danish municipalities. The municipalities have their own care facilities, as well as contracts with independent institutions and private institutions. The care facilities financed solely by the municipality obviously challenges the so called competition between the care facilities and construct a quasi-market with pseudo-competition. Moreover the specializations of (scientific) knowledge in the respective institutions make way for a certain kind of contract: the contract based on trust.

Contracts and hybridity

In the following the definitions of contracts is referring to Åkerstrøm Andersen as he refers to Ian Macneil in Hybrid Forms of Governance (Andersen, 2012). As Åkerstrøm Andersen writes:

> *"He [Ian Macmillan] defines discrete contracts as a transactional relation, which is impersonal and without duration. Discrete contracts represent pure promises, pure transactions characterized by the fact that, apart from the exchange, no relations exist between the parties. [...] Relational contracts on the other hand, are defined as personal and permanent (Macneil 1974:721). Relational contracts establish relations that comprise whole persons, deep communication, and non-economic personal fulfillment (Macneil 1974:723)"* (Andersen, 2012, p. 207).

Åkerstrøm Andersen further agues how it is possible based on the above quotations to construct a continuum of contracts where the transactional and relational contracts form the two outer poles (Andersen, 2012, p. 207). In the context of the Department of Families and children, we can identify at least three

different kinds of contract with the care facilities which on the continuum may be placed three different places.

The contracts with private organizations contracted to asses and help the child at risk may be placed at one end of the continuum, defining the contracts as discrete contracts promising pure promises stipulated in the contract. However the internal contract as described previously, when presenting the OEC-model may here be defined more as a relational contract primarily based on trust and less on pure promises. Finally the semi-internal semi-discrete contract with independent institutions places as revealed in the almost non-definition a placement on the continuum as somewhere in the middle, balancing the contract both on trust and pure promises. The before mentioned quasi-market and pseudo-competition make way for the wannabe hybrid as Åkerstrøm Andersen notes in the introduction to Hybrid Forms of Governance: *"Internal contracting is a wannabe hybrid. It is a hierarchical organization that desires to become a market of competing actors"* (Andersen, 2012, p. 4). One may even state that with the NPM-like model of OEC, the necessity to rely on the specialized knowledge embedded in the contracting interventions, the matter of trust opens up for an observation of the contracts – not as wannabe hybrids – but as actual hybrids (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2012).

It does not lie within the frame of this paper to discuss or make a more in depth analyses of the construction of contracts as welfare technologies in view of Reflection Theory, which is to be introduces shortly. In this paper the contracts are seen as "an obligation between systems of communication rather than between individuals." (Andersen, 2012, p. 209). But even more so the contracts form communication linked to the challenges of the welfare organizations and is here seen as elements supporting the idea of the hybrid welfare organization engaged in child protection.

To get a clearer view of the codes and logics observable in the frame of child protection and municipal organization, a modified systems analysis inspired by Maria Appel Nissen is conducted (Nissen, 2010b). The findings are based on a

literature study of existing literature, research and official documents from The Ministry of Social Affairs, The Municipality of Aarhus and The National Social Appeal Board.

The Analyses is as stated inspired by the work of Maria Appel Nissen (Nissen, 2010) (Nissen, 2010b) and what she names as "A Functional Methodology" and "Reflection Theory" [my translation] and the operationalization of the methodology. However here it is conducted in a somewhat modified form.

The purpose of using the methodology in the specific context of social work with families and children is to examine the possible multiplicity of couplings and codes and hereby observe some of the communicational systems in the environment of the child at risk and the complex structures of society engaged in communicating about the child at risk.

Basically the purpose of the analyses is to observe the different forms of inclusion communicated by the organizational systems observing the child at risk.

The purpose however also links to the plural-dimensional objective of this paper: to explore practical use of the system theory of Niklas Luhmann, to explore possibilities and consequences of implementing the observation of social work as an organizational hybrid, and to get inspiration to further elaboration on the topic in relevance with the educational system at VIA University College, Department of Social Work, where I'm presently employed.

In the operationalization of the functional methodology Nissen turns to Roar Hagen and the term Reflection theory (Nissen, 2010b, pp. 3-4) [my translation]. The key observation of Reflection theory is to identify distinctions of inclusion and exclusion of the systems and hereby observe the function of the system and its orientation towards problem and problem solving (Ibid.), hence explore the contingency of – in this case – social work in a reflection of possible alternative observation and functional equivalents. What happens if we see the child at risk as the media for the different but comparable organizational entities of social

work with disadvantaged families and children through the lens of reflection theory?

In the following systems analysis the observation is drawn towards how the different organizational systems observing the child at risk distinguish themselves from the environment and how they through their problem horizon facilitate inclusion and/or exclusion (Nissen, 2010b).

The diagram exemplifies how the organizational systems observe their function in society, their possible identification of problem and problem solving strategy.

Systems Analyses

	The Municipality	Department of Social Affairs	Department of Families and children	Centralized Notification Unit	Administrative Unit	Interventions
Function	Incl. to citizenship	Social inclusion solve/ prevent social problems	Incl. to reflection	Incl. to protection	Incl. to budget control	Social inclusion
Orientation	Power/non power	Right/ wrong legal/not legal	Help/not help	At risk/not at risk Protection/non protection	Payment/ non payment Data/no data	Help/not help Well/not well At risk/not at risk Contract/no contract Transmittable/non transmittable
Media	Citizen	Disadvantaged citizens	Disadvantaged families and chil-	Child at risk	Spreadsheets Order forms	Divergent children and families

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Structural couplings	Power, Economy, Law	Power, Economy, Law, Science	Law, Help, Economy, Science	Help	Economy	Help
Form	Inhabitant registration	Case work	Notification DUBU/ICS[3] Article 50 Investigation Contracts	Notification or show	Order form	Visitation form Contract
Problem focus	Public interest mission and goals accountability	Public managerialism Performance indicators	Law abiding Assessment within a financial frame	Risk assessment	Budget control Surveillance Accountability	Investigation, transformation change
Problem solving	Fulfillment of political goals Welfare technologies	Evidence based social practice e.g. MST[4] and PMT[5]	EOR model It technology Intervention	Risk assessment Contact	Controller meetings	Therapy Assessment
Time	Present aspiration of future	Recursive	Recursive Future	Present Future	Recursive Future	Present Future /recursive
Reflection theory	**Political orientation Interest Knowledge**	**Professional management**	**Knowledge Action**	**Speedy intervention and contact**	**Public managerial practices**	**Knowledge and theories reg. children and families.**

(Nissen, 2010) (Schrøder, 2012) (Servicestyrelsen, 2011) (Rambøll, 2012) (Ankestyrelsen, 2012) (Adolphen & Vangsgaard, 2014) (Aarhus Kommune, 2013) (Aarhus Kommune, 2010) (Socialstyrelsen, 2012)

In the following, chosen elements are highlighted from the analyses.

The function of the municipality is here outlined as one for inclusion to citizenship and the ability to form power through present and future votes. The seman-

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[3] ICS stands for Integrated Child System and DUBU the digital platform designed to support the methodology of ICS, a so called *holistic* method to assess the developmental needs of the child. (Socialstyrelsen, 2012)
[4] Multi Systemic Therapy
[5] Parent Management Training

tics of citizenship is found in the goals, values and principles outlined in the overall purpose and mission statements of the municipality.

The function of the Department of families and children is one of social inclusion through reflection. In the department the observed is observed through e.g. the Article 50 investigation, with the purpose of engaging the family in a reflexive dialog about the problems and resources of the family. It may be argued that inclusion is not possible without the reflexive dialog, and with the risk of over-simplifying explains how disadvantaged families who move as civic nomads between municipalities may not be observable for the departments of families and children. Also one might argue, are families with lesser potential for engaging in reflection less eligible to receive help?

The diagram shows five systems out of six oriented towards help in society, however how they acknowledge help/no help differs. As the purpose of this paper is to examine the form of organization based on two research questions:

First question of first order: do the organizational systems oriented towards help emerge into a third –hybrid- form?

Second question of second order: How does an organizational hybrid not solely oriented towards well-established systems observe the child at risk?

This leads to further questions such as: how may this impact society's observation of solving social problems in relation to children at risk?

The hybrid form of child protection

In this paper *hybridity* is understood in the context of systems theory, and therefor defined as a structure not solely linked to a separate code, but a dynamic fluctuant structure – to which different codes can be identified over time. Or in different terms: the problem horizon of the organizational systems is an elusive one, which irritates the other systems observing the child at risk. The observation of the fluctuant hybrid form creates possible new meanings linked to the problem horizon – however this is contingent. There is a risk of producing

noise to the extent that the hybridity of form collapses and reduces the communication to only a few well-established systems.

Based on the preliminary analyses, the argument here is that the organizational structures observing the child can be seen as one dynamic and fluctuant hybrid organization which may change form, codes and logic in regards to its specific function and form of inclusion and exclusion.

The analyses find a high degree of specialization in communication and diversity in the semantics observing the child at risk. This may support the observation that the organizations observing the child at risk form an emergent hybrid form of communication when dealing with irritations from the environment and attempting meaningful adaptation to external factors (Sand, 2012).

These codes exist in the hybrid organizations not as competitors but as logics and forms of reflection made available for the organizational systems. In the functional differentiated society the logics do not possess a system, nor are they up for negotiation, more so they facilitate certain   communication and make their complexity available for other systems through the respective codification. However this paper finds that when observing the hybrid form as fluctuant, which codes and communication are made available and when, is uncertain. And here by leaves the child at risk, at risk.

The hybrid form and the complexity and uncertainty hereby allow us a sneak peek into the black box.

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