

Categorizing clients with disabilities

-Exploring the gap between political goals and practice in Danish job centers

By Finn Amby, assistant professor, Ph.D. VIA University College (FINA@via.dk) and Lena Kjeldsen, assistant professor, Ph.D. VIA University College (LKJE@via.dk)

Introduction

For many years, a low employment rate among people with disabilities has been considered a political problem in Denmark (Regeringen 2004; Regeringen 2009; Regeringen 2013; Regeringen 2016). In spite of this, we observe no progress in the field. If anything, the problem has grown even worse. According to survey results, the difference in employment rates between people with and without disabilities rose from 32 percent in 2002 to 34 percent in 2014 (Larsen & Høgelund, 2015). Most recently, results from 2016 show an employment rate for people with disabilities at 52 % compared to 79 % for people without disabilities (Larsen & Larsen 2017).

The lack of success undoubtedly has several explanations, both among people with disabilities (the supply side), in private and public companies (the demand side) as well as in the employment system. The starting point for this paper is based on the assumption that local employment initiatives can have a significant impact on whether a countrywide political desire to get more people with disabilities in regular employment can be realized. Furthermore, the literature on street-level bureaucracy has shown that not only local policy initiatives are of importance but that also the discretion of the individual caseworker is crucial (Lipsky 1980; Evans 2008; Brodtkin 2010). If it can be expected that disability often possess challenges both on the supply and demand sides of the labor market, it will be exactly in the job centers that support may be granted to address these problems.

According to a classical top-down perspective, six sufficient and generally necessary conditions for the effective implementation of legal objectives can be identified (Sabatier, 1986). Two of them are especially relevant here: 1) Clear and consistent objectives, 2) Implementation process legally structured to enhance compliance by implementing officials and target groups. The position of disability in Danish employment policy illustrates severe problems in fulfilling these conditions (Amby 2015A). The employment situation for people with disabilities is not directly included as part of the problem identification in the labor market and employment policy in the period 1992-2012, and none of its instruments specifically target the problem. People with disability are not included in the definition of target groups in the general employment policy, and recent reforms seem to continue on the same path (Amby 2015B). As a result, only a loose and insufficient connection exists between the overall policy goal and the local employment service, where outcome should be obtained. It is therefore not sufficient to examine whether the job centers meet the objectives that are directly provided by the law. It should also be clarified whether the job centers utilize this broad

municipal scope to do more in relation to the unemployed with disability than the law requires them to.

A survey combined with interviews in 2012 among managers and key workers in the field of disability in Danish job centers found only few systematic efforts in job centers to provide support for job-ready unemployed with disabilities (Amby 2015A). The study gives little evidence to suggest that local authorities generally take initiatives in this area in addition to what they are directly bound to by law. But there are wide variations between job centers. The study, however, contributes little to the explanation of this variation. There are virtually no significant correlations between local political and managerial priorities and job centers' efforts on the matter, and local framework conditions do not seem to have any measurable impact.

The aim of this paper is to provide new knowledge about job centers handling of disability, primarily from a street level perspective. Earlier Danish studies have by large focused on employment and disability at the stage where the client already has been categorized as having a disability (e.g. Stone & Møller 2013). This study offers new insight to the field in a Danish context by exploring the process in which people with disabilities are categorized during their first interactions with the job center by asking two interconnected questions:

- a) To what extent do job centers construct categories that capture client with disabilities?
- b) How do caseworkers identify whether (and to what extent) the client has lasting impairments that can be considered a handicap in the search for new employment?

The empirical data for this study is comprised of a survey among caseworkers in eleven job centers in Denmark and interviews with both caseworkers and managers in three of those job centers.

In the next section, we provide a brief historical overview of disability and employment in Denmark followed by our theoretical framework. After this, we put forward the methodological considerations behind the study. Combined, these sections form the basis for the analysis and the following concluding remarks.

[Disability and employment in Denmark: A historical overview](#)

The actual position of disability in Danish job centers must be seen as a result of major changes both in the understanding of disability and in employment policy in general over the last 25 years (Amby 2015A). The purpose of this section, therefore, is to establish a basis for the later analysis through a historical overview.

[The concept of disability](#)

From the beginning disabilities was largely seen from a narrow medical understanding. A disability was regarded as a flaw in the individual, which in most cases can be coupled together with a medical diagnosis, and the responsibility for these groups was placed in special institutions. From the 1960s, new objectives related to normalization and integration gradually made it more obvious that

disability also represented a political issue which society in general had to deal with. In the Scandinavian countries, the new orientation regarding the understanding of the disability concept landed with the formulation of the relational conceptualization of disability (Gustavsson, Tøssebro & Traustadottir, 2005; Shakespeare, 2006). Here, impairment is still attributed significance, but it is first in relation to their surroundings that the impairment becomes a disability if the surroundings are not designed appropriately:

Impaired functioning + Barriers in surroundings = Disability

Since the 1990s, the disability policy in Denmark rested on four basic principles: equality through compensation, sectoral responsibility, and solidarity. Equality must primarily be understood as equality of opportunity. Compensation relates to what actually needs to be done in practice to ensure that equal opportunity can become a reality. It can be a question of compensation in relation to the individual or simply general measures that make society more accessible to everyone, regardless of disability. Sector responsibility principle states that all sectors of society have their share of responsibility for ensuring that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as others. This applies to all ministries and all parts of the public administration, but it applies in principle also to citizens and corporations. Finally, solidarity signals that society must ensure that people with disabilities achieve equal opportunities without it being an extra expense to them.

Disability policy is both defining the target group and helping to establish efforts in relation to this group. In the time when handicapped people were cared for, disability was an umbrella-term for a number of clearly defined groups, each with its medically defined characteristics. With the relational concept of disability, the disability is considered central at the individual level, even though disability first occurs with barriers in the environment. The word 'disability' now appears very rarely in Danish legislation. As a final consequence, it is then no longer possible to categorize people as disabled, and a categorization on the basis of disability is also associated with major challenges.

The new disability awareness ideally relies on each sector to take responsibility for: 1) Defining the target group with impairments, 2) Identifying potential barriers in the environment that can lead to disability, and 3) Implementing the necessary individual or collective compensatory measures. The question then is how the employment sector has handled this obligation.

[Disability in the general employment policy](#)

In the course of the 1990s, a number of major changes were made to the labour market policy, later referred to as the labour market reform. The reform was the manifestation of a strategy for guidance and improving the qualifications of the unemployed persons eligible for unemployment insurance combined with shorter benefits periods, tighter requirements regarding availability and increased control (Amby 2015A). The content of and comments to the legislation shows that persons with a disability are not referred to in this context. To the contrary, this group is clearly not considered part of the new active labour market policy. The state-run employment services are

responsible for the employment effort, although these measures do not include those receiving social assistance, early pensions and persons with physical or mental disabilities or special social problems. These groups remain the responsibility of the municipalities, as dictated by legislation pertaining to social affairs.

In the first half of the 1990s, legislation was also passed regarding municipal activation as a supplement to the Social Support Act. Persons with a disability are not specifically mentioned in the law on municipal activation or in the comments to the proposals in the period. In 2000, the municipalities became obligated to draft a written plan for those receiving welfare benefits who had problems in addition to unemployment, *'e.g., persons with mental or physical health problems or inadequate fundamental social skills'*. Welfare recipients were divided into two groups: persons whose only problem was their unemployment and persons with problems in addition to unemployment. An obligation to seek work actively was introduced for the former group, and they were to report to the employment services, just as the assessment of availability was tightened.

In connection with a new government in Denmark in 2001, the Ministry of Labour (*Arbejdsministeriet*) was re-named the Ministry of Employment (*Beskæftigelsesministeriet*). At the same time, the active social policy was transferred to the Ministry of Employment, meaning that measures related to employment for both the insured unemployed and welfare recipients were gathered in the same ministry, and employment was no longer a matter of social policy. This decision must be said to have been the natural extension of the development over the years prior to the new government. There were increasingly parallels between the content in activation and the rights and obligations of the unemployed, regardless of how they provide for themselves. Nevertheless, the change sent an important signal regarding the greater emphasis that was to be placed on measures aimed at getting the weaker groups into employment.

The first major legislation involving the Ministry of Employment passed in 2002–03 as part of a broad political settlement about getting more people in employment. The legislative reform in connection with 'More in work' meant that the legislation regarding persons with a disability/permanent impaired capacity to work formally became part of the overall employment effort. However, there was largely exclusively talk of a legal-technical integration of already-existing rules. The 'More in work' legislative package did not include any signals about the need to make a special effort towards these groups. The comments to the proposed legislation include an overview over the themes in the new employment policy in which youth, unemployed over age 50 and refugees/immigrants are referred to but where, for example, persons with disabilities/an impaired capacity to work are not mentioned.

As a result of a restructuring of the administrative system in Denmark, job centers were established in every municipality from 2005. The final step towards the decentralization of the employment policy was taken in 2008, when it was decided to gather the entire responsibility for employment-directed measures in the municipalities. Decentralization was combined with state management by objectives. Ministerial objectives for the employment effort were to be declared annually, and the new job centres became responsible for drafting an employment plan on this background and carrying out an accounting of the results in the following year. In order to support the regulation, a

central system was established for reporting the data on the work based on detailed specifications determined by the minister.

Disability was not selected in the set of rules as a criterion for an independent target group, aside from recent graduates with a disability, who can be considered for employment with subsidized wages on special conditions within two years of having completed their education. Here, however, the disability criterion first becomes apparent when an individual is referred to one of the permanent benefits. The set of rules does not obligate the municipalities to be especially aware of unemployed persons with a disability among the insured unemployed and welfare recipients. In the period 2007-2013, none of the ministerial objectives specifically mentioned the disability area. The same is the case for the centrally established requirements for reporting data, which is the basis for the accounting of results in the job centers and for how the employment regions monitor the work carried out in the job centers. Disability is not defined as an independent contact group that is to be reported, and there is not to be any reporting of activities for early pensioners and recently graduated persons with a disability.

Conceptually, other interesting shifts have occurred in the course of the period. In the past, disability was almost equated with a seriously impaired capacity to earn a living (*nedsat erhvervsevne*). More recently, it became common to talk about the impaired capacity to earn a living also possibly owing to many other factors, which also led to the development of the flex-job arrangement. Individuals with a disability became a sub-group of a larger group in which an impaired capacity to work (*nedsat arbejdsevne*) was in focus. In the course of the 1990s, the loss of the capacity to provide for oneself was replaced by an assessment of the capacity to work. This meant focusing on the individual's resources instead of their limitations, which is decisive for being able to identify a function in the dynamic labour market, which can enable individuals to provide for themselves completely or partially. A permanent impairment is included together with a long number of other factors in this assessment.

Compensation to employed persons with a disability

The act on personal assistance in 1992 made it possible to subsidize a business to provide wages for a personal assistant for an employee or a self-employed individual with a disability. The personal assistant is to assist the disabled person with the practical working functions that the individual in question cannot take care of themselves due to their disability. The practical working functions are to be seen in contrast to the actual content of the work that the person with a disability must be able to carry out without the help of an assistant. It was only used in ordinary positions from the beginning but was quickly extended so that the arrangement also came to include so-called flex-jobs and sheltered jobs (*skånejobs*).

In 1997, different rules were gathered in legislation ensuring compensation to disabled in employment. The Compensation Act thus started with personal assistance, and it remains the most important part of the law. Support for aids and workplace design were financed in the early years

via temporary appropriations but have since become a permanent part of the compensation act. The other two arrangements in the legislation pertaining to compensation can hardly be called compensatory, as they contain priority to positions in the public sector and introductory support to recent graduates with a disability.

From the beginning, focus in the personal assistant arrangement was on visual, hearing and mobility impairments, but in 2007, the target group was expanded as to include persons with mental impairments as well. In the actual Compensation Act the target group is defined as “Persons who due to disability have difficulties in getting and obtaining employment without compensation.”, and the target group for personal assistance is defined as follows: “Employees, self-employed and unemployed, who due to substantially reduced physical or mental function capacity need particular personal assistance.”

The philosophy of the Act on Compensation seems to be that making compensatory arrangements available can enable people with permanent disability to work on an equal basis with others - either in regular employment or in flex-jobs. But how the unemployed people with disabilities should be equipped to find these jobs receives only very little attention. As a result, job-ready unemployed with disabilities are subject to the same rules as any other job-ready unemployed with increased availability assessment, activation requirements and demands for job search, etc. Additionally, unemployed people with disabilities, who are considered to have reduced working capacity, are subject to the same disciplinarian and the same job search requirements and availability as other vulnerable groups.

Summing up

Because of structural unemployment as a problem, a new development of the labour market policy and social policy was set in motion in the beginning of the 1990s. Many minor adjustments during the following twenty years led to a major shift as demonstrated above (see also Larsen, 2013). As shown above, it is difficult to talk about clear and consistent goals in relation to disability in Danish employment policy. Furthermore, there is only a loose and insufficient connection between the overall policy goal and the local employment service. The lack of awareness of disability in the general employment policy implies a risk that job-ready unemployed with disabilities do not receive the support that is needed to gain a foothold in the mainstream labor market. But in practice, it depends entirely on how the law is implemented and administered in the job centers.

Theoretical point of departure

Our understanding of the implementation process primarily builds on the integrated implementation model (Winter & Nielsen 2008). According to the model, the implementation process takes place within the frames of a given policy design and consists of organizational and inter-organizational implementation behavior, management, the behavior of street-level bureaucrats and target-group behavior. Together these processes lead to implementation results

in the form of performance (output) and effect on the target group (outcome), which are seen as the dependent variables in the model. From implementation results, feedback mechanisms can lead back to both policy design and the implementation process itself. Finally, all elements in the model can be affected by changes in the socio-economic environment.

Our focus will be at the frontline caseworkers, but due to the model, organizational and managerial factors play an important role in their interpretation of political objectives and legislation into decisions in relation to different target groups in practice. In this translation process categories and categorization also play a key role (Harrits & Møller 2016).

Political and social categories

Categories are social constructions and categorization is a natural part of human life. Categories also play an important role in politics:

“Governance is conducted through rules, and rules are composed of categories. Every rule divides people by their identity, their behavior, or their situations, and then specifies how members of different categories are treated differently. In some deep sense, what we mean by “policy” is precisely this deliberate ordering of the world according to the principle of different treatment for different categories. This is the idea behind the notion of target groups” (Stone, 2005).

Ingram and Schneider originally defined target groups as “...persons, groups, or firms selected for behavioral change by public policy initiatives such as statutes, agency guidelines, or operational programs.” (Ingram & Schneider, 1991: 334). Two factors in particular are ascribed significance regarding the attention of politicians regarding various target groups (Ingram & Schneider, 1993): the strength of the group (strong or weak) and how the group is constructed (positively or negatively). This produces a model with four categories of target groups: the advantaged (strong, positive), the dependents (weak, positive), the contenders (strong, negative) and the deviants (weak, negative). A groups positioning has consequences for the formulation of political objectives and the choice of means in relation to the group in question. The social construction of a target group requires, to begin with, the definition of a set of socially meaningful characteristics and, secondly, attributing specific values, symbols and images to these characteristics (Ingram & Schneider, 1993: 335). The demarcation of target groups is a social construction, but what is decisive for Ingram and Schneider is the demarcation of the individual group resting upon objective conditions that can be tested empirically.

In this context, it is worth noticing that Ingram and Schneider place the group ‘disabled’ in the ‘dependent’ category in their model; that is, weak but looked upon positively by society. The international literature concerning social construction of target groups and the consequences for policymaking has only paid little attention to the question of disability. In an examination of 111 applications of Ingram and Schneider’s theory in scientific articles 141 target populations are identified (Pierce et al., 2014), but remarkably disability does not appear on this list.

As illustrated above, social categories form the basis for constructing political categories (target groups). Ingram and Schneider have, however, been criticized for simplifying the complex relationship between social and political categories (Harrits & Møller, 2011; 2012). The social construction of a category will often be affected by other factors than the strength and whether the group is looked upon positively or negatively (Harrits & Møller 2011; 2012). The social construction of a target group often involves assessments that are not necessarily agreed upon. Furthermore, it is not always an easy task to determine who to include and who to exclude from a given category (Yanow, 2003). Social construction of categories often plays an important role in the next step as well, when political categories are to be used by managers and case workers in practice. In this regard, studies have shown that caseworkers use social categories in addition to political ones in the process of categorizing the client e.g. their perceived attitude to work or physical appearance (Rosenthal & Peccei 2006). Uncertainty about definitions of and boundaries between target groups will therefore have consequences both in policy design and in the implementation process.

It is also the case when it comes to disability. Disability policy is both defining the target group and helping to establish efforts in relation to this group. In the time when handicapped people were cared for, disability was an umbrella-term for a number of clearly defined groups, each with its medically defined characteristics. With the relational concept of disability, the disability is considered central at the individual level, even though disability first occurs with barriers in the environment.

The absence of clear political definitions regarding disability leaves wide room for discretion to the local caseworker. But how is this discretion conducted in practice? More knowledge about that will give new insights about the relation between political and social categories in this particular situation (Harrits & Møller 2016).

On this background, we have the following expectations, which we use as guidelines in our analysis:

We expect that the caseworkers have difficulties in defining disability as a political category.

- We expect that the absence of clear political categories regarding disability will have the result that unemployed with disabilities are categorized according to other existing political categories.

We expect that the caseworkers construct social categories in order to determine whether the client has a disability that can hinder his or her labour market inclusion.

We expect that organizational conditions and managerial decisions have effect on the caseworker's discretion behavior.

- We expect that organizational decisions about forms or other instruments will be guiding the caseworker's categorization processes.

Methodology

The empirical data for this study is comprised of a survey among caseworkers in 11 job centers and interviews with caseworkers and department managers in three of those job centers. By employing a strategy of mixed methods, this study is able to identify patterns of practice across a wide section of caseworkers in different municipalities in various regions of Denmark while offering a unique insight into the practices of caseworkers in three job centers in a specific region in Denmark. Hence, the two types of data enriches each other, as the results from the survey is used as a base for the interviews and the interviews can shed a light on the underlying reasons for the results of the survey. As such, the survey asks questions concerning the caseworker's knowledge about the term disability and when they normally make judgement about whether a client has a disability while the interviews digs deeper into the categorization processes that takes place during the interactions with the client.

A crucial element in most studies is getting access to the field and the people you wish to study due to gatekeepers. In this case, gaining access proved to be a hard task due to two factors. First, the employment field has been marked by large-scale national reforms for many years, for example the social assistance reform of 2014. An integral part of many of these reforms has been a growing body of paperwork that the individual caseworker has to fill out. Studies done by The Association of Danish Social Workers and external research institutions show that caseworkers spend up to 80 amount of their time on administrative tasks (see e.g. Reiermann, 2013). The development towards a heavier administrative burden for caseworkers has caused many managers of job centers to become reluctant to add another administrative burden on the caseworkers- and in this case an external task that may not be to the immediate benefit of the job center. Second, in more than one occasion, we experienced that managers of job centers had difficulties relating to the theme of this study. As one manager put it: "We do not use the word disability in our job center". The manager explained that the job center to a large degree look at the resources of the client and not the limitations. This line of reasoning complies with the turn in the discourse on unemployment in many Western democracies in the past decade with a larger focus on the work ability of the citizen (Herup Nielsen 2015) and as mentioned earlier, the topic of disability is not at the forefront of the ministerial goals for battling unemployment.

Survey

The survey was distributed in 11 job centers in two waves, the first in October 2016 and the second wave in February-April 2017 due to the mentioned difficulties in obtaining access to caseworkers.¹ The total sample for the study is 136 of which 9 email addresses turned out to be invalid and were deleted from the study, making the sample 127. The response rate for the study is 54 percent (N: 69). Out of these 69 respondents, 54 percent (N: 37) of the respondents work with unemployed client on unemployment benefit, 35 percent (N: 24) work with unemployed clients on social assistance, educational assistance or allowance for immigrants and the remaining 11 percent (N: 8) with clients on sick leave, in rehabilitation or job capacity assessment. The latter

¹ Initially, an email was sent to all the job centers in Denmark.

group is excluded in the part of the analysis regarding the process of identifying disability among the unemployed citizen as their clients have already undergone categorization. They are however included in the analysis of how the caseworkers construct categories that capture client with disabilities.

Overall, the response rate is satisfactory within the sample. It is, however, worth noting that there is a difference within the sample in regards to the respondents. In four job centers, the survey was distributed to all the caseworkers whereas in the other seven, the survey was distributed to all the caseworkers in one department: in four job centers to all caseworkers in departments working with clients on social assistance and in the latter three clients on unemployment benefit. In addition, we had no means of validating the number of caseworkers in the individual departments nor the total population of caseworkers in Danish job centers and the quality of the overall sample is therefore dependent on the degree to which the leaders of the job centers have sent us the correct number of emails. As a consequence of these uncertainties, it is difficult to generalize the results of the survey to the remaining job centers in Denmark. This will be further elaborated in the last section of this paper, where we discuss the results.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2017 (February-April) in three job centers. The job centers are situated in Jutland and of a varying size. Job center A and B are a part of relatively small municipality with less than 50.000 inhabitants while job center C cater to a larger amount of inhabitants with more than 50.000 inhabitants. In all six caseworkers were interviewed and the interviews were conducted with both caseworkers in the job center simultaneously. Although the object of interest for this study is the practices of caseworkers, we chose to include interviews with three department managers to identify the routines of the job center and how these guidelines effect the individual caseworker. Hence, we interviewed a department manager in all three job centers. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour.

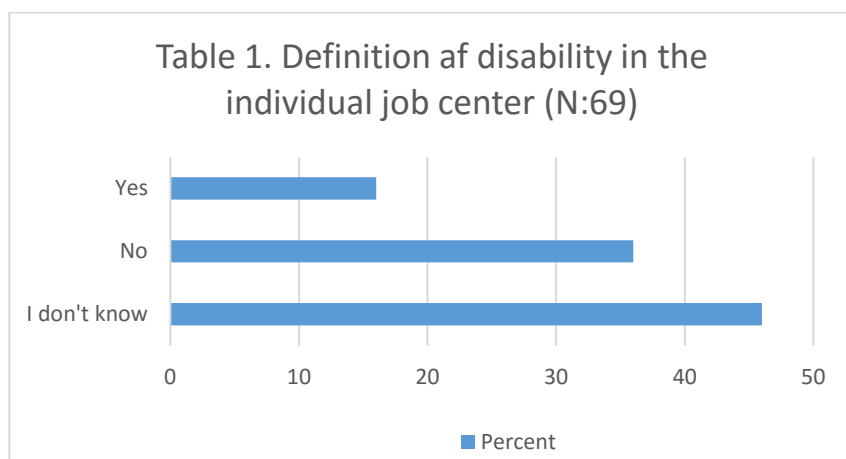
Preliminary results

The remainder of this paper is in a preliminary state since our data collection did not conclude until the end of April 2017. Hence, the analysis below only illustrates some of the main points of our empirical data and is unfortunately not fully elaborated.

As the theoretical section of this paper underlines, there is an inherent connection between the construction of political and social categories as the two influence each other continuously. In spite of this, we have chosen to separate the analysis of these concepts into two different sections, knowing that this is an artificial and theoretical distinction. The third section in the analysis deals with the organizational and managerial priorities and its influence on the caseworker's discretion. For all sections, both results from the survey and the interviews are reported as they can strengthen the validity of each other.

Defining disability as a political category

One of the opening questions in the survey concerns whether or not the job center has a working definition of handicap or long-term impairment. As table one illustrate, 17 percent (N: 12) of the respondents says that their job centers has such a definition, while 36 percent (N: 25) says that their job center does not have a working definition.



Question: Does your job center have a working definition of disability or long-term impairment?

Perhaps even more striking, 46 percent (N: 32) of the respondents are not aware of whether or not their job center has a working definition of handicap or long-term impairment. This result could indicate a general lack of focus on the group as a whole. Another interpretation could be related to the political and rhetorical shift in employment policies from disability as a target group to a widespread focus on the resources of the individual client. This interpretation is underlined by the following quote from the survey that respondents were able to make at the end of the survey:

"In the job center, we recognize that there are people with long-term impairments. However we try to focus on the resources that the citizen actually has in regards to holding a job and supporting themselves and not the barriers that are the impairment entail." (survey respondent)

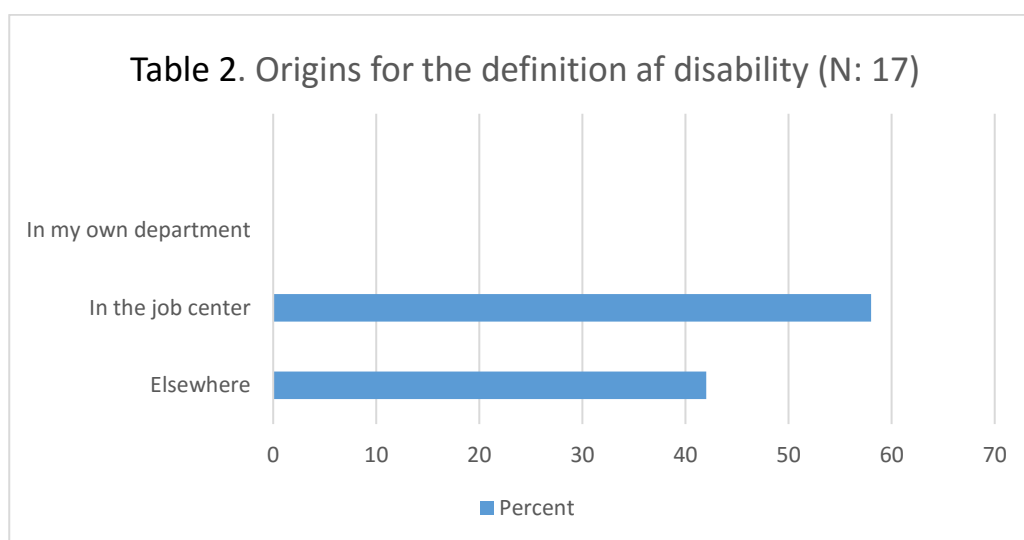
This line of reasoning is also is also echoed in the interviews where all the respondent state similar opinions. In job center B, the caseworkers say:

"No we don't [have a joint working definition]. People are met according to their resources and disabilities. Because even if you have the same diagnoses, there is a big difference in the resources that the individual hold, so we do not pigeonhole people like that. You cannot do that (Caseworker 1). Off course, if the person has a diagnoses, you assess whether it is serious or not." (Caseworker 2)

The 17 percent who say that their job center has a working definition of disability, were in the following question asked to recall the definition if possible. The majority of these respondents do not remember the definition, however, the remaining respondents mention the Act on Compensation. As such, the respondents of both the survey and during the interviews apply the political category as loosely defined in the Act on Compensation as their frame of reference for

categorizing clients with disabilities. When asking the respondents in the interview about whether or their job center has a working definition of disability, the Act on compensation was quickly referenced in all the interviews across the job centers, including in the quote above where the caseworker in job center B use the category “serious” as a way of categorizing the clients. The definition in the act is, however, not clear as we have referenced in the historical overview. This is also mirrored in the survey as 81 percent of the respondents say that they are aware of three of the compensating arrangements (personal assistance in the work place, subsidy for personal aids and subsidy for workplace design) and 51 % are aware of the possibility for newly educated people with disability to be employed with wage subsidies.

When asked where the definition originates, 58 percent said that the definition is created in the job center and 42 percent that the definition originates from outside the job center, most referring to the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment.



Where does the definition originate?

Based on the current literature on categorization, we expected that the caseworkers have difficulties in defining disability as a political category and in continuation hereof, we expected that the caseworkers place clients with disabilities in existing political categories as defined in the law. The results presented above is in line with our expectations as there seems to be a large percentage of the respondents who say that they are not aware of whether or not their job center has a working definition of disability or directly state that they use a resource oriented categories instead. When the respondents in both the survey and the interviews apply a definition of disability, it is primarily linked to the Act on Compensation as this is the political document in which disability is most clearly mentioned as a political category.

Defining disability as a social category

In addition to the political categories, the caseworkers also use different social categories in their construction of disability as a category. When the caseworkers were asked to describe how they in their daily interactions with clients identify that a client may have a long-term impairment, they initially all reacted with a long pause, followed by a an attempt to describe a certain “sense” or “hunch”.

“This [the first meeting with the client] is where we typically determine or feel that something is off, if something is actually off. Some clients are more open than others are and with some, we can sense if something is off because of our experience (caseworker 1). Well, I think it is a matter of knowing general human behavior that means you can sense what is lurking beneath.” (caseworker 2, job center A)

“They [the clients] are all different, but in a way they are all alike. It is not called match 1-5 anymore, but ready to work, ready for education and so forth. Some, however, need more help and guidance than the normally unemployed. It is a hunch.” (Caseworker in job center C)

“I would say that it is a hunch, but a hunch based on what the client tells us (...) In my experience, it is not a problem identifying a physical disability, but rather the people who has experienced some sort of psychological crisis for some reason and therefor is very fragile” (Caseworker in job center C)

Where the first quote does not indicate any social categories the last quote includes the category of “fragility” in regards to clients who have a mental impairment. Put differently, the caseworker builds on the political category of mental impairments to better describe the category. When asked what the caseworker means by fragility, she explained that fragility often is expressed through tears or a feeling of hopelessness. A somewhat different category used to describe clients with mental impairments is apathy. As one caseworker describes it:

“It is typically the people who walks in with their “thousand-yard-stare” and says: Don’t touch me. I’ll do this by myself” (Caseworker in job center A)

The categories here are both used to describe clients with mental impairments and underline the complexity of identifying disability in clients.

In addition to these social categories, the caseworkers also derive categories based on the clients educational records that the client offer during the interactions with a caseworker. In this case the categories concern the type of class and the ability to finish an already initiated education:

“I’m thinking that if I am dealing with a young client with low mental capacities. In that case, I can draw on the papers from UU [Youth Career guidance Center] that will show if the person has been placed in a special class all through school that catches our attention (Caseworker 1). Yes, it gives us an indication. E.g. if the person has dropped out of 12 schools, it makes you wonder what

the cause if this is and it makes you ask the person more questions.” (Caseworker 2 in job center B)

Organizational and managerial priorities and its influence on the caseworker’s discretion

Closely linked to the individual construction of disability as political and social categories is the organizational and managerial priorities that influence the individual caseworker (Harrits & Møller 2016). Hence, based on the theory on categorization and implementation, we expect that organizational conditions and managerial decisions have effect on the caseworker’s discretion behavior, including that organizational decisions about forms or other instruments will be guiding caseworkers’ categorization processes.

As explained in the historical section of the paper, the employment policies have undergone a transformation during the past decades towards focusing on the individual’s resources instead of their limitations. This line of thinking is apparent in all three job centers although to a varying degree. In job center C, the interpretation seems to be most extreme as one of the caseworkers state:

“We do not categorize. As in never. The need of the clients are 100 percent individual.”
(Caseworker in job center C)

In opposition to this statement, a caseworker in job center A explains that the job center is working on creating a dynamic scheme to categorize different impairments.

In the comment section of the survey, a respondent points out:

“There are only few institutionalized procedures concerning aid to people with disability. A lot depends on whether or not the citizen chooses to bring it up in his conversations with his caseworker. If he chooses not to, disability is rarely a factor in the process.”

This quote is in line with a statement from a department manager in job center C who says that the chance of identifying a disability in clients is dependent on whether the client himself chooses to speak about his impairment. However, the manager argues that the caseworker often can detect that something is off during meeting later in the process.

Finally, the caseworkers also pointed to the influence of the unemployment insurance fund (A-kasse). According to the Act on Active Employment, the client holds a meeting with his or her unemployment insurance fund before meeting with a caseworker at the job center. At this initial meeting with the unemployment insurance fund, the fund can decide whether or not it wishes to take part in the first meeting in the job center which otherwise in job center A and C are held as joint meetings where up to 20 newly unemployed people are present. In both cases, the caseworker describes how certain unemployment insurance fund rarely wishes to take part in the meeting at the job center while others always participate unless the client has actively declined the possibility. In other funds, it is decided in a case-to-case basis. However, the caseworkers experience, that the unemployment insurance fund often choose to participate if the counselors believe that the client has some sort of impairment. Put differently, the initial categorization process start in the

unemployment insurance fund in some cases, as the counselors there have a possibility to make an initial judgement of whether the client is in need of a handheld process in the job center.

Concluding remarks

The analysis demonstrate how the caseworkers have difficulties in creating categories that can contain the concept of disability or long-term impairment. The relational character of the term and the sporadic treatment of the term in the legislation makes it imperative to come up with some social categories to help in identifying disabilities in clients. Additionally, the analysis show a lack of focus on disability as a factor in the meetings between the caseworker and the client which is indicated by the fact almost half of the respondents are not aware of whether their job center has a working definition of disability or not and both respondents from the interviews and almost half of the respondents in the survey are not aware of who the appointed key-caseworker (nøgleperson) who has a special knowledge about disability and the different means of compensation, is. The caseworkers create their own social categories to give a deeper meaning to the political Categories and the organizational structures, in this case schemes formed by the job center influence the categorization process.

During the interviews, it became clear to us that the job centers organize their efforts in completely different ways. In an ideal setting, we would be able to continue to interview caseworkers in job centers until a point of saturation. In this project, that is however not an option. Although, we are not able to generalize our finding concerning how the job centers organize their Efforts, the process of creating categories to be able to identify people with disabilities or long-term Impairment turned out to be similar across different institutional settings.

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