Innovative practices in work, organization and regional development – problems and prospects
Introduction to the special issue
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The call for contributions to this special issue of the Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration had the title *Innovative Practices in Work, Organization and Regional Development – Problems and Prospects*. Inspiration for the title came from the papers and discussions held at a conference organized by the HELIX VINN Excellence Centre (Linköping University) in June 2013. In the call, organizational perspectives on change, learning, health, gender equality and of course, innovation were emphasised. Another ambition was to present possibilities rather than problems. As is shown in the contributions, the call received a number of qualified and interesting responses which together cover almost all of the issues stated, although not all in each contribution. Therefore, in these first pages we will offer some general reflections on the concepts and questions raised.

Innovative practices indicate *change*. Each era is considered, at least by those who live in it, to be remarkable when it comes to change. Such is also true for the times we live in today, and so we talk of the ever more intense rate of change, as change seems to be – paradoxically – the only constant state. Societal change is realized with and through organizations: new organizations are crea-

ted, old organizations disappear, mergers and acquisitions take place, new organizational forms, re-organizations, organizations change sectors, new names for old organizations, new systems for management and control, as well as changes in inter- and intra-organizational relations. The scope of some changes seems to be global, as some organizations are multinational, but also as ideas of how to organize travel (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996; 2005). One of these travelling ideas is New Public Management (NPM), a trend that is directly or indirectly related to all the stories that are told in the articles in this special issue. That the cases presented are from Australia, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Sweden help illustrate the global aspects of the phenomena as well as the diversity of practices, and how translations differ between contexts – not just by national characteristics but also with organizational features like sector-characteristics, geographical location and competing power systems like the position of professions.

To put the focus on the *public sector* and its organizations – as the contributions to this special issue to differing extents do – has its advantages. This is because as Johnsson *et al.* state in their article; the organizations of the public sector

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"bring to the fore, numerous work organizational dualities and tensions that must be negotiated". We will also argue that the changes in the public sector – which in practise means public organizations – in developed welfare states heavily influence all other organizations and sectors. In the Scandinavian context two sectors, the public and the private, have totally dominated both minds and practices. The profound changes during the last decades have given rise to the so-called third sector or civil society (c.f. Wijkström and Lundström, 2002) – which is illustrated in the contributions by Neubeck *et al.*, Gawell *et al.* and Lindberg. The relevance of an international, or EU, perspective is also illustrated in discussions on national changes, actions and reactions. There are also methodological advantages with focusing on the public sector, as "public" usually means transparency towards the public as part of a democratic system.

NPM has a number of key characteristics (e.g. Hood, 1991). One of them is that the private sector is framed as a role model for the public sector (Czarniawska, 1985; Sundin, 2006). This means, for instance, that competition is promoted with the assumption of increasing efficiency and quality. Competition is promoted both inside existing organizations and with the inclusion of new providers that can be either new or old organizations. As such, NPM challenges work practices and management as well as organizational borders. Some of the articles focus how the new management system is dealt with in public sector organizations. Three different Australian public sites are presented in the article by Johnsson, Milani Price and Manidis: a hospital emergency department; a local government council and a corrections centre. The typical work practices vary and so do the practitioners' roles and the ways in which they handle and negotiate the demand for changes. To capture these nuances of organizing, an alternative approach to organizational innovation is suggested namely that of innovating-in-practice.

It can be said that decisions and actions taken to organize and meet new challenges are being triggered by NPM. This is described in the case presented by Neubeck, Elg and Schneider, although they do not use the label NPM to describe it. Some of the initiatives presented by Gawell, Pierre and von Friedrichs also relate to NPM. In the article by Callerstig we meet key actors in a Swedish municipality, who are engaged in trying to use the newly instituted rules for public procurement in order to establish qualitative practices and not just quantitative means for choosing among potential providers. A complication is that the alternative providers are few and those available are not always up to standard. The rules and regulations to which the community must comply cannot directly and easily be "blamed" on NPM but also on EU regulations. These regulations are, however, also inspired by NPM, and act as a reminder that many changes and processes are simultaneously ongoing. For a thorough exposé of the national, international and transnational scope of NPM, see Sahlin-Andersson (2002) or Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011).

It is difficult to isolate cause-effect-relationships in organizational life. Despite the problems presented and discussed, we will regard the story told by Callerstig as an example of one way of actively using the rules to the benefit of

both the customers of the services provided and to the community's economy and efficiency. The focus in the article presented by Hasu and Lehtonen is employees on low hierarchical levels and how they work to "handle the situation". In their article, we meet a group of service-workers at an immigrant reception centre in Finland – an establishment where a number of organizations meet inside the same building – the service provider and the customer organization. The service-workers, however, identify with their own group and their loyalty is with the group and with the individuals they meet at work. How the individuals in focus handle organizational borders in their daily work is discussed in terms of "shared care", or caring, an undertaking framed as "leadership with care". Leadership is exercised by those at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy. They behave like street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), giving the concept a meaning for new groups of employees as a result of the new organizational principles (Sundin and Kovalainen, 2012). First line managers are the group often identified as the one that, in practice, deals with the consequences of changes introduced in contemporary organizations (e.g. Kanter *et al.*, 1992; Balogun, 2003; Antonsson, 2013; Meagher and Szebehely, 2013; Thörnquist, 2013). However, the consequences of the changes vary, as is shown in all the contributions.

The article by Neubeck *et al.* presents an example of an organization established in order to take advantage of changes taking place. The authors present an intermediary organization created to help organizations belonging to the so-called third sector to fulfil the demands stated for new providers to the public sector. Similarly, as discussed in the article by Gawell *et al.*, the networks constructed between private small and medium-sized firms and a local university in a peripheral region can be interpreted as an organizational construction typical of our time. By organizing, support from the local, national and the EU level to the peripheral region can be realized. On the other hand it could be stated that some of the problems, both for the individuals and for the organizations, are caused by the peripheral localization. To use some of the resources offered by the public system to facilitate cooperation with the regional branch of the university system is an example of the triple helix constellation that is so often found to be positive (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000; Etzkowitz and Klofsten, 2005). The characteristics of some of the organizations even indicate a quadruple helix construction. The networks described and discussed by Lindberg are in a less advantaged position. The members of the networks that she studies are mostly self-employed women who find themselves excluded from existing networks and arenas. What they do is not acknowledged by policy-makers and supporting authorities as fulfilling their ambitions and visions of growth-orientation – thus, these women are working in unprivileged positions.

Innovative practices in work, organization and regional development was a key expression in our call for papers and it is a top priority on most political agendas at all levels. But the traditional way of defining innovations and innovativeness is challenged here. Some of the articles, in particular the contribution by Lindberg, explicitly discuss and elaborate the concept along "the challenging lines". We claim to see innovativeness in all the cases described in the articles

included in this special issue in that the organizations that are described work in new ways, with new partners, and while reacting to external forces they are also trying to be proactive. Some time ago these characteristics are likely to have been labelled *entrepreneurship*. In our labelling practices, we are indeed "children of our time", using the innovation concept in this way. *Regional dimensions* play an important part for the actors in the cases presented both by Lindberg and by Gawell and her co-authors. These contributions come mainly from universities in Northern Sweden where regional differences and inequality have been on the research agenda for a long time.

The concepts, questions and theories used in the papers are related to the disciplinary background of the authors. Some concepts, like organization and context, are used in almost all contributions but not in the same way. Hopefully, this will not cause confusion as the contributing authors have been asked to define the meaning that they attribute to such concepts. Differences can also be observed when it comes to methods used. The practice-based approach and perspectives seem to appeal to researchers interested in interaction with "the field". Several of the contributions are based on action research approaches (Reason and Bradbury, 2013), or, what in the Scandinavian context is more commonly discussed in terms of interactive research (Svensson *et al.*, 2002; Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson, 2006; Svensson *et al.*, 2007; Johannisson *et al.*, 2008).

All the contributions to this special issue directly or indirectly concern *gender* – as all forms of work and organization is a matter of gender (Acker, 1992; 2006; 2012; Hearn and Parkin, 2001). The public sector, to which all the papers included relate in one way or the other, is commonly the sector dominated – at least in numbers, by women – no matter whether the geographical context concerns Australia, Norway, Iceland, Sweden or Finland, and irrespective of whether we situate the cases of organizing within sparsely populated areas or in metropolitan cities. Reforms targeting the public sector have effects on the work carried out by employees and managers, and these sometimes challenge and sometimes reify gendered labour patterns (e.g. Davies and Thomas, 2002). The extent to which gender is emphasized in the analyses varies, however, both with regard to the different contributions and also to how the concept is used. For Lindberg, gender and gender bias is the starting point for her interactive research and the focus of her bottom-up analysis. Callerstig also takes as her starting point the gender bias and how to deal with it on the organizational level. Her starting point is in line with the dominating political discourse on gender mainstreaming – both on the national and the EU-level. Gender perspectives and analyses could also have been used in the cases presented by Hasu and Lehtonen and Johnsson *et al.*, but here, the focus is on other issues, although the reader is still given the opportunity to view gender as part of the organizational substructure (Acker, 1990).

All in all, the articles included in this special issue provide examples of innovative practices that contrast with the traditional view of innovation as a novel idea realized in firms in the form of goods. The analyses also demonstrate alternative aspects of the urge to reform and innovate, such as stories of resistance to change in terms of "doing the best one can with what one has access to". The

articles comprise examples of issues considered to be the challenges of our time, such as gender equality and social inclusion, resource efficiency and distribution, quality of services as well as ways of organizing and acting that are typical of how these are dealt with. Examples include intermediary organizations and boundary spanning collaborative efforts. Even though the challenges described and dealt with in the articles are of a general character, the analyses demonstrate the importance of sensitivity towards the context in which the practices are embedded. The research efforts behind the papers rime well with this in that they are usually interactive or at least occur very close to the fields of study. Thus, the studies are also illustrations of research that is relevant for both practitioners and researchers alike.

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