



# Special Issue Introduction: Making Sense of Institutional Changes in the Welfare Professions

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## A Changing Society?

Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes  
Turn and face the strange  
Ch-ch-changes ...<sup>1</sup>

The lyrics by David Bowie, in their own unique way, capture a fundamental aspect of modernity—that sense of ever-forward motion, of perpetual change and constant progress, reminiscent of the concept ‘panta rei.’ While drawing inspiration from Heraclitus, this forward movement has been noted as a constant characteristic of modern society, something that has intensified and developed into what can be called late modernity. In the social sciences, there is a general interest in changes over time and how to label the transition when society goes from one historical phase into another; for example, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies, 1887/2001), from mechanical to organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1858/1933), and from industrial to post-industrial society (Bell, 1973). The relationships between two historical phases are primarily marked by a dialectical connection that reflect distinct ways of looking at society (Asplund, 1991). In line with this, and according to dominant views in the social sciences, Western European society during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century went through a period of significant changes that impacted the institutions for social cohesion, interpersonal relations and delivery of welfare services. The first half was characterized by extensive industrialization, linear progress, technical economic rationality and control as well as solidarity among social roles (e.g., class consciousness and conflicts) and imagined community (e.g., cultural identities and nationalism). Traditional modernity evolved gradually and transformed into a radical phase characterized by reflexivity and fabricated uncertainties (Giddens, 1990). Central themes during this radical phase included decentration, fragmentation of identities and the unintended consequences of societal development and economic growth (Beck, 1996). The radicalized phase of modernity has revealed that its inhabitants are inherently incomplete and vulnerable to the consequences of their own rational actions (Bauman, 2000).

This marked shift from one societal state to another is however difficult to pinpoint empirically. Arguably we are dealing with a shift that is cognitive and

epistemological in nature, shaping cultural expressions and influencing how the evolving structural environment is perceived. Shifts in perspective bring about perceptions of radical transformation. The past is rendered in a strange new light. Yet this light might sometimes be blinding: the viewer loses focus, and important details are lost. We here take the standpoint that change is not a result of a *sui generis* process, that is, as a quantifiable state in and of its own. Change is a question of perception and experience, and thus needs to be understood as a deeply situated and contextualized phenomenon. If we want to understand the ability of welfare institutions to achieve societal and internally set organizational goals, we need to situate this in the context of technology and modernity's norms of progress. Consequently, we need to approach and understand changes from a qualitative and in-depth approach – and that is at the heart of this special issue. The papers included in this special issue all provide concrete and situated examples that illustrates the broader developmental trajectory initiated at the end of the 20th century, continuing through to today. These examples serve as an entry point for understanding contemporary community life and welfare professions.

In this introductory text, we will map a broad image of the state of the welfare professions in the Nordic welfare state, and thus provide a necessary context for the articles in the special issue. The meat of the argument, however, can be found in the seven articles that comprise the special issue.

## A Changing Public Sector

The public sector covers a wide range of activities, ranging from defense and policing to education and health care. The main task of welfare professions is to deal with the needs of individuals that best can be met through collective efforts. Welfare professions address the hardships that the achievements of modernity bring that are difficult to cope with on an individual level using individually controlled resources. The services provided are sometimes centralized (common examples include military forces and police), sometimes decentralized (such as care services for children and elderly), and sometimes simultaneously centralized and decentralized (as in education with a decentralized and largely autonomous school organization and a centrally controlled curriculum). In many cases private organizations and/or the public and third sector undertake the provision of public services. The borderline between public, private and non-governmental ways of providing welfare services has become increasingly blurred. Moreover, the services provided involve a vast array of occupations, from low skilled routine workers to highly skilled expertise. Thus, viewing the public sector as a singular domain is highly dubious. Instead, the public sector should today probably rather be understood as a case of 'entangled institutional logics' (Alvehus and Andersson, 2018: 92), a term signaling the inherent complexities that provide challenges to public administration and management.

Disregarding for a moment the organizational aspects of the public sector it is worth reflecting on the broader role the public sector seeks to fulfil. A welfare *system* is a government funded program or policy that is designed to provide services to individuals in need (Korpi & Palme, 1998) comprising a network of institutions that provide social support to people during a certain time of their life. In many cases, the welfare system exists to address market failures, for example by providing financial support to the fraction of the workforce that is unemployed (reasons may of course vary, from frictional unemployment to long-term sick leave). An often-used definition of welfare was originally mentioned by the English sociologist T. H. Marshall (1949, 1965) who argued that welfare, in a broad sense, consists of material means with immaterial ends. A welfare *state* as an institution has certain responsibilities towards its citizens, such as the lessening of income gaps, extension of common experience and enlargement of citizenship and the rights connected to this community (Marshall 1949). These social responsibilities are carried out by the means of redistribution of material resources and directed transfers.

The welfare system per se needs not to be part of a publicly funded sector, yet this has been a dominant model in the development of the welfare systems in northern Europe post World War II as part of a larger modernization project. The *social state* that grew out of this in mid-

20<sup>th</sup> century encompassed a range of systems including legislation, unemployment support, security of employment, and unionization (Bauman, 2011). The welfare system of the Nordic countries is often seen as unique in that it progressively redistributes market incomes to those who are in need of social support. Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) identified that the activities of the welfare state are related to two overarching rationales, de commodification and defamilialization. Individual welfare shall, according to the social-democratic model, neither be determined by a position on the labor market nor by the reciprocal relations of one's family. The Nordic countries all share that same egalitarian model for redistribution and transfers, but there are significant differences between as well as within them. This special issue clearly illustrates that whereas there are similarities on an overarching level, the Nordic welfare states also display significant qualitative differences. However, the last few decades have seen the retreat of the social state in favor of systems and solutions that are less collectively oriented – sometimes somewhat imprecisely referred to as the 'neoliberal state.' This emerging welfare system is, accordingly, more oriented towards individual responsibilities in terms of managing risks (Beck, 1992) and in terms of an increased focus on flexibility (Beck, 2000; Standing, 2011).

## Changing Organizational Practices in the Public Sector

It has become popular among social scientists to lament a supposedly declining welfare state. A common culprit for this is New Public Management (NPM), initially described by Hood (1991). NPM has evolved into an overarching term encompassing various endeavors aimed at fostering the attitudes, practices, and orientations required for the public sector to work in concert with market-oriented reforms. NPM introduced consumer choice and opened up the public sector for private entrepreneurs within a public funded system. On the one hand these reforms aimed to increase efficiency and quality, but on the other they increased demands of administrative control and new systems of accountability combined with an idea of professionalized and specialized management (Karlsson, 2017). NPM reforms have proven extensive and resilient (Svallfors and Tyllström, 2019) and are generally understood to having radically changed the operational principles of the welfare system and the working conditions for its professions.

Arguably, the implementation of market ideas and deregulation create conflict between the welfare state's egalitarian principles and its functioning as an effective organization (Szebehely & Meager 2013). For example, a German study show that the reimbursement rates connected to private insurances in health care create structural inequalities in individuals' access to care (Werbeck et al., 2021). Processes of exclusion and crowding out has also been identified in the Swedish health care system when allowing for private health insurance (Lapidus, 2019). There is clearly a tension between optimizing the public sector's efficiency as an economic organization, and simultaneously trying to ensure that politically driven goals of an egalitarian welfare system are not overlooked or compromised. Another example is the irony that the supposed efficiency increases from management models brought in by consultants may in fact decrease efficiency, as shown in a study of the British National Health Service (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). Sometimes, it seems that the logic of professional work, playing a key role in many activities in the welfare state, is just not in concert with a market- and managerially oriented logic as the latter ignore 'the complexity, ambiguity, and distinctiveness of professional work' (Alvehus, 2022: 6).

Similar to the market-oriented reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, NPM has become an easy explanation for almost all failures. However, by the vague characteristics of the term such explanations often contribute to a simplistic view of the underlying processes. Through this, NPM has become a counterpoint for other initiatives aimed at reforming the public sector, such as 'trust-based management' (Björk and Tengblad, 2023; Bringselius, 2018) or value-oriented approaches such as 'public service logic' or 'service dominant logic' in the public sector (Osborne, 2018; Osborne et al., 2021; Westrup, 2018) as well as 'value-based health care' (Porter and Teisberg, 2006). These management approaches, based on result-oriented and performance-based competition, align with the principles of NPM and ideas of market

values and efficiency more or less seamlessly. The different management models may operate in different ways, but more or less fulfill the same result-based objectives as NPM.

These developments have had profound impact on the organizing of welfare services. The perception of constant and accelerating change promotes ‘fast management’ (as in fast food): ‘management that is change-obsessed, attention-starved and over-hyped; that binges on mass-produced ideas and lacks substance; and that suffers harmful effects similar to those of habitual (“Supersized”) fast food consumers’ (Kärreman et al., 2021: 1).

In relation to the story of grand change from one societal system to another, to the story of the impact of NPM, and to the story of fast-management, stands professionalism. Welfare professions aim to manage and organize services that are based on normative ‘ideas of a broader contribution to society ... the *summum bonum*, the common good’ (Alvehus, 2022: 4). In many cases counteracting NPM and other changes, and operating within the framework of the welfare state’s egalitarian principles, professional structures are robust and are not always easily transformed: Professions are, by their nature, a conservative force. Professionals’ efforts to control their task domains by various means (Alvehus, 2022; Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977; Freidson, 2001) often counteract managerial efforts. Even though professions sometimes display great capacity to move from one area to another due to their flexible knowledge base (Abbott, 1988), and through increasing connectiveness (Noordegraaf, 2020), professions are often successful in maintaining status quo and counteracting change (Alvehus et al., 2021a; Alvehus, 2022). For example, medical professions can through their dominant position often co-opt other logics (Andersson and Liff, 2018; Waring and Bishop, 2013), and stratification within professions provide opportunities to extend and defend jurisdictions (Alvehus et al., 2019; 2021b). That control efforts always lead to a degradation of professionalism (a classic example being Oppenheimer, 1972) is thus a too hasty conclusion. Instead, we see a breadth of responses from different forms of hybridity to co-optation and loose couplings (Alvehus, 2022) and professions are often able to retain their autonomy despite demands for change (Arman et al., 2014; Gadolin & Andersson, 2017).

In order to understand these changes, we need to acknowledge how they travel between different settings and how they are interpreted and become manifest locally (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995). In short, understanding change, and the perception of change, demands nuanced and detailed accounts of its enactment in the everyday life in and of organizations.

## Understanding Change in Detail

Looking at these trends, they appear paradoxical and contradictory. Where are we headed, after all?

This special issue counteracts simplistic answers to that question. We need to acknowledge that the changes we can perceive – such as changes in legitimization and on-going modernization (Lapsey & Knutsson, 2017) – are indeed there, but also that we, as observers, are often too easily seduced by simplistic images of radical change: from society X to society Y, the juggernauts of NPM and fast-management, etc. We do not need to deny that such phenomena and trends exist – but we should, as researchers, mobilize a nuanced epistemological response.

In this special issue, seven papers are included. There are papers from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. The Scandinavian welfare model is often characterized in a general way, but it consists of qualitatively different systems that influence the everyday conditions of welfare service provision. Throughout these papers, we find nuanced descriptions of changes, change effort, and the everyday struggle of managers, politicians, and professionals in coping with changes. It would be paradoxical for us to draw these papers together in a simple overarching trend, or short-handedly summarize their contribution. That is not the point – the point is quite the opposite. We encourage the reader to engage with these papers in their empirical detail, appreciate the nuance, and savor the in-depth empirical work and theorizing presented in the papers. In such attention to and appreciation of detail lies perhaps a first step in liberation: not from unwanted changes, but at least from epistemic illusions of unstoppage

forces operating upon us, and towards a more realistic view of agency in relief against the backdrop of societal transformation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>David Bowie, ‘Changes,’ from *Hunky Dory*, 1971