



Introduction¹

This issue presents six new articles dealing with central issues in working life research in the Nordic countries. The articles all center around questions related to (the lack of) competencies and skills that are in demand in organizations and in relation to the labor market in general. They illuminate how skills – and skills gaps – are produced in complex dynamics of agency and structure, action and discourse, reflexive and deliberative subjective processes, and objective restraints, how labor market policies and organizational regulations affect working life, and how these policies in turn are counteracted. When I read the six articles, I was struck by the contradictory and often paradoxical nature of working life. The nuanced empirical studies of the six articles in this issue brings this out in fascinating detail. Let me just walk readers through the themes discussed.

The first article ‘Knowledge and Position: How to Manage Ambiguous Public Welfare Work’ by Chris Rønningstad brings us into the public welfare service in Norway. Through qualitative interviews, Rønningstad investigates how frontline managers in semi-professional settings appear knowledgeable, as they interact with caseworkers and counselors. This line of management is characterized by ambiguity, as the work undertaken by the managers – as well as the work performed by the counselors and caseworkers – relies on considerable discretionary judgements. As the caseworkers and counselors have no professional background to support their activities, they become highly reliant on the support of the managers. Rønningstad’s findings indicate that the managers’ abilities to support the employees depend strongly on the managers’ intimate practical and factual knowledge about work practices. Furthermore, the employee’s appreciation of managers relies not only of the manager’s familiarity with their work but also on the manager’s positional and formal authority. Knowledge and position thus help the employees in counteracting the ambiguity they encounter.

The second article ‘To See or Not to See: Importance of Sensemaking in Employee Self-direction’ by Gisela Bäcklander is also concerned with the increasing ambiguity of work. As ambiguity and complexity increase in modern working life, employee self-directedness becomes a crucial competence. Bäcklander has interviewed managers and HR people in the information and communication technology industry and in consulting in Sweden to investigate how they conceptualize employee self-direction, how they recognize it, and what strategies they deem viable to underpin self-directedness. She found two different conceptualizations. One approach, the so-called evaluative, sees self-directedness as a personal capacity that can be recognized when recruiting. This conceptualization suggests that human resource allocation becomes the essential passage point for companies’ efforts to obtain self-directed employees. Another approach, the cultivation approach, conceptualizes self-directedness as a situational and interactional emergent phenomenon that can be supported through processes that enable sensemaking and situational judgement.

¹ You can find this text and its doi at <https://tidsskrift.dk/njwls/index>.



In the article ‘Welfare-to-work Policies Meeting Complex Realities of Unemployment Citizens: Examining Assumptions in Welfare’, Nina Boulus-Rødje sets out to illustrate incongruencies between labor market policies and how the policies are effectively enacted in real life. She critically compares the assumptions embedded in welfare-to-work policies with the real-life effects of the policies experienced by unemployed citizens. In relation to a longitudinal ethnographic study conducted in a municipal job center in Denmark, the author has interviewed frontline workers and unemployed citizens to investigate how the policies were enacted and experienced. These studies were supplemented by discourse analytic studies of policy reports and media to unpack tacit assumptions of the policies and the realities of the involved citizens. Boulus-Rødje exposes some of the numerous contradictions and paradoxes that appear when the policies are enforced, and she argues that policy-in-use needs to be studied and reflected more carefully in order to provide more flexible and holistic labor market initiatives.

The fourth article ‘Hard-working Heroes or Curious Students? – Au pair Positioning, Organizing, and Negotiation’ by Agnete Meldgaard Hansen and Maria Hjortsø Pedersen also focuses on policies and their consequences. The two authors base their article on an empirical material retrieved from a large ethnographic study they conducted in the Philippines in 2012, and supplement their findings with group interviews with au pairs working in Denmark. Inspired by the tradition of governmentality studies, they conduct an anthropology of policy to investigate how the complexities of transnational migration policies and labor market regulations position the au pairs. Contradictory subject positions as hard-working heroes or curious students are made available by the policies and offer both restrictions and opportunities for au pairs’ possibilities to negotiate and organize in order to improve their working conditions.

The fifth article ‘Reflecting on Work Values with Young Unemployed Adults in Finland’ by Tuuli Hirvilammi, Marianne Väyrynen, Ingo Stamm, Aila-Leena Matthies, and Kati Närhi thematizes the interplay of structure/agency and policy/lived experience to discuss the ascertainment of work values among young unemployed Finns. By employing a critical realist conception of ‘internal conversation’, the authors discuss and analyze interview material obtained from six group interviews conducted with young adults who were participating in activation programs. The interviewees are concerned with issues that relate to self-realization and the opportunity to contribute to society, sufficient income to live independently, social expectations, challenges of finding employment, and unsustainability of the employment system. Centering on these themes, the interviewees position themselves as constrained agents. The authors demonstrate that the interviewees are not only expressing their individual and subjective attitudes, but are also in fact vindicating the structural embeddedness of their values.

The final article of this issue also deals with the Finnish youth. In the article ‘ICT Intentions and Digital Abilities of Future Labor Market Entrants I Finland’, Merij-Tuulia Kaarakainen is concerned with future generations’ ICT skills and intentions to enter the digital labor market. Her study is based on data collected from survey questionnaires and skills tests in upper secondary schools in Finland during 2017. She finds that the students programming skills are rather low, as they are not supported by the

national curriculum. Governmental efforts to rectify these skills deficit in Finland have only started in 2016, and the effects of the initiative will only manifest decades from now. The surveys also point to gender differences in relation to the students educational and occupational intentions to enter the ICT field. Very few girls have intentions to enter the field in the future. The author suggests that early experience with ICT in education and the exposure of female role models for young girls might increase their willingness to consider an ICT future career. Generally, moreover, a much broader educational strategy must be developed to tackle the ICT skills gap. This calls for training and retraining, continuous professional development, life-long learning, etc.

Enjoy your read!
Anders Buch