



Introduction

The first article within this issue deals with the history of Swedish working life research. Carin Håkansta is the author of this interesting article.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sweden had an absolute dominance in the Nordic working life research, but from the mid-1990s, there was a gradual dismantling of the institutions that had carried the Swedish working life research. The most serious attack on the Swedish working life research came in 2007, when the National Institute for Working Life was closed down together with the Swedish Council for Working Life Research. A number of 'Work Science' departments at universities were established around 2000, but many of these institutions are now being integrated into larger institutions without any specific working life identity.

The rise and fall of the Swedish working life research is associated with the rise and fall of the Swedish Social Democrats: as Håkansta points out, the strong public support to working life research in the 1970s and 1980s was linked to the Social Democrats' efforts to find a third way between capitalism and communism. The economy should be democratized, working life should be democratized and working life should be an arena for human development.

The great project of the Social Democrats has been replaced by another project: the neo-liberal project that has competitiveness as the main goal. This dramatic change of focus has not superseded working life research, but has changed the societal rationale behind the research: Work life research is supposed to contribute to an expansion of the labor force by reducing absenteeism, improve employability, including people with reduced work capacity, and retaining older employees, and working life research is supposed to contribute to a rise of productivity by improving the work organization and finding ways to involve employees in innovation.

In the other Nordic countries, we have not had the same dramatic development in working life research as in Sweden. However, the societal rationale behind the funding of working life research has followed the same patterns: The rationale has shifted from democracy and influence, health, quality of life and equality to employment, retention, learning and innovation. At the same time, working life research has developed as a small and integrated part of bigger research units.

These institutional changes and the change of rationale have unlikely reduced the proportions of working life research. One indication for that is the many participants in the Nordic Working Life Conference in Gothenburg in June 2014. Also, the increasing number of submitted articles to this Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies indicates that Nordic working life research is widespread. Also, the large number of downloads of articles from the journal indicate that working life research is doing well. Articles published in 2011 had on average 1500 unique downloads in the spring 2014.

Although the institutions of working life research have changed and the rationale behind the public funding of the research has shifted, the researchers have organized themselves independently. In Finland, Sweden and Denmark, working life researchers



have created independent professional associations for working life research, and national journals for working life research have been established. This has made Nordic working life research to more than a mirror of rationales of the funding authorities. For the majority of working life researchers is quality of life, influence, meaning, dignity and health an end of itself from where critical perspectives of the research are formed.

The articles in this issue balance, like in previous issues, between the societal rationale for increasing labor supply and better productivity, and the rational of the research itself for improving quality of life.

Kjeld Nielsen and Louise Moller Pedersen find in their article about Human Resource Practices that involvement and a good psychosocial work environment (equal to high quality of working life) can make even failed Human Resource Management policies a success.

Kirsi LaPointe and Pia Heilmann contribute to the understanding of the individual sense making in their working life by analyzing narratives of career change in the media. They find that the dominant narrative is a story about a shift from a traditional competitive career to a job that is meaningful, lower status and less hectic—it is a narrative about a shift from instrumental orientation to a working life with quality. The narrative stresses individual responsibility for the quality of working life, and thus has a neo-liberal perspective: if you are dissatisfied with your work, take responsibility and change your career.

Teemu Turunen examines the work orientation in 15 European countries with a special focus on Finland. Also, in the article by Turunen, we find evidence for the importance of the qualitative aspects of working life. Turunen finds that intrinsic rewards are the factor that has the greatest positive effect on employment commitment and organizational commitment.

Ulrik Gensby presents the ‘Chronicle Workshop’ in his article, which is influenced by the democratic perspective Nordic working life research was born with. Gensby shows how such workshops can contribute positively to Work Disability Management at the company level.

Hans Michélsen, Ulla Sebrant and Abbe Schulman have made an extensive and successful intervention project in a hospital clinic. The goal was to improve the psychosocial work environment. The project was carried out in a comprehensive dialogue between researchers and staff. A model of ‘sustainable psychological support’ to avoid mental ill health among the employees was developed.

Tove Midtsundstadt and Hanne Bogen examine active ageing policies at the company level. They find that employers as well as union leaders and employees seem to prefer economic measures to prevent early retirement, like bonuses and reduction of working hours. This despite the fact that there are very good arguments saying that more individualized interventions focused on the quality of work would be more effective in retaining employees.

Thomas Wihlman contributes to the discussion of employee-driven innovation. He thus contributes to the development of a classic theme in working life research that has been given new life with the concept of ‘employee-driven innovation’. Wihlman focuses his study on welfare services, and he identifies three factors that must have special attention if employee-driven innovation should be strengthened.

Happy reading!
Helge Hvid