Article

‘I hope the doctor will send something black-or-white’. Reflective practice at the frontline in the Danish public employment service.

by

Leif Tøfting Kongsgaard
CEO, Væksthuset
Guest researcher, PhD
Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University
Denmark
E-mail: lk@vaeksthus.dk

Keywords:
reflective practice, critical reflection, employment service, institutional ethnography, street-level bureaucracy

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31265/jcsw.v19i2.667

Abstract

The provision of public employment services to people in vulnerable life circumstances is notoriously filled with complexity and dilemmas. Not only are there multiple potential solutions to a given problem, but the very definition of the problem itself, 'what it is all about', is subject to interpretation and discretion. Faced with such intricacies, employment service professionals need to engage in critical reflections. Despite this recognised need, little is known about the actual processes involved in professional reflections. The aim of this article is to contribute empirically to our understanding of how professionals engage in collective reflections, specifically zooming in on the logics and reasonings behind these reflections. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Danish employment service organisations, the research shows that professional reflections tend to be more instrumental than critical, and more focused on certainty and what to do, than on understanding dilemmas and bringing in new perspectives on problems. Following the perspective of reparative critique, the analysis explores avenues for fostering more critical reflections within the context of public employment service. The findings bear implications for understanding the institutional and organisational embeddedness of professional reflective practices within welfare work, particularly in the realm of public work inclusion services.

Keywords: reflective practice, critical reflection, employment service, institutional ethnography, street-level bureaucracy

Introduction

Scholars and professionals alike seem to agree that delivering public employment services (PES) to people in vulnerable and complex life situations[1] goes beyond a mere implementation of 'legislation', 'best evidence' or 'what works' technologies (Andersen et al., 2017; Caswell et al., 2017a). Instead, professionals in these services grapple with wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973), dilemmas and conflicting demands that can be framed in numerous ways. Addressing such challenges necessitates professionals and organisations to reflect not only on 'what to do' as part of a discretionary practice, but also on 'how to understand' the problem situations at hand. Proponents of critical reflections have turned our attention to the dynamic nature of problems, categories, solutions and interventions, thus highlighting their constant construction and reconstruction through language, assumptions, categories, discourses, etc. (Askeland & Fook, 2009; Fook, 2010; Fook & Gardner, 2007, 2013; Taylor & White, 2000).

Whereas the processes of professional discretionary practices in general have been the focus of much research, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of how professionals engage in collective reflections within diverse organisational settings. The research presented in this article contributes to filling this gap by addressing two key research questions: 1) What characterises reflections at the frontline in Danish employment services?, and 2) How can a critical reflective practice be cultivated in this setting? Based on empirical findings and the development of a typology of reasoning, the paper suggests that professional reflections often leans toward instrumentality, seeking certainty and actionable solutions, rather than introducing novel perspectives and understanding. Aligned with a reparative critique perspective (Monrad & Grünfeld, 2017), the article demonstrates and discusses how critical reflections can be developed in such professional settings.

[1] From here on, I will only use the term 'employment service', hereby specifically meaning employment services for people in vulnerable life situations suffering from one or more health-, social or substance abuse-related problems, which are typically intertwined and complex.

Wicked problems and dilemmas of employment services – previous research

The task of assisting unemployed individuals in vulnerable life situations to secure employment or education is far from a straightforward process of implementing policy, best evidence or guidelines. It is a complex undertaking riddled with dilemmas and complexity. Whereas Lipsky (2010) has pointed to the inherent dilemma between resources and demands, and Zacka (2017) to moral dilemmas as generic definitions of street-level bureaucracy work, other scholars have mapped the specific dilemmas and complexity of PES related to individuals facing mental, social, physical and/or substance abuse issues. PES professionals are tasked with facilitating both personal change and progress towards labour market inclusion, while concurrently handling documentation, control and sanction for the unemployed. This dual responsibility has been described as employing both people changing- and people processing technologies (Caswell et al., 2017a). Moreover, professionals are expected to balance client participation and the imperative to swiftly secure employment for as many individuals as possible (Caswell 2018; Caswell & Larsen, 2022). Furthermore, they must make use of discretion in the process of deciding 'what the problem is all about', how various problems might be interconnected, and hence which interventions to choose.

This description of PES aligns well with the concept of 'wicked problems', originally coined by Rittel and Webber (1973) in the context of city planning. The notion has since been adopted by various professional fields, including organisational theory, planning and evaluation theory (Harmon & Mayer, 1986; Head & Alford, 2015). Shortly put, without doing justice to the nuances in Rittel and Webber's original article, the concept of wicked problems has its roots in systemic theories of complexity. It describes problems that are not fixed but dependent on how you understand the problem itself and the possible solutions to it, with 'the problem' typically seen as interconnected with other problems. In other words, the problem depends on how you frame it. Furthermore, the solutions to a wicked problem are not true or false, but fall on a spectrum from good to bad depending on the context.

This contrasts with tame problems, and the degree of wickedness or tameness can vary within a given problem situation (Head & Alford, 2015: 716). The more wicked a problem, the less suitable standardised services become, thereby necessitating a discretionary process of problem construction. Whereas individual professional discretion has been the focus of much research (e.g. Abbot, 1998; Caswell et al., 2017b; Lipsky, 2010; Molander & Grimen, 2010; Smeby, 2013), there is a paucity of knowledge regarding collective constructions of problems (Nielsen & Monrad, 2023), and how 'peer level accountability' (Zacka, 2017) is done. Scholars such as Brodkin (2017) and Hupe et al. (2015) have emphasised the need for studies of the 'black box' or 'the missing middle' of these organisations. This article addresses this gap by examining the concept of reflective practice as a theoretical framework for understanding theses reflections.

Instrumental and critical reflections – a theoretical framework

The need to engage in professional reflections in dilemma-laden professions has been argued extensively in the literature of social work, health and the broader field of welfare services. Since around the year 2000, *reflective practice* has regained scientific interest, explored both theoretically and empirically (e.g. Béres & Fook, 2019; Boud et al. (Eds.), 2006; Bradbury et al. (Eds.), 2010; Fook & Gardner, 2013; Fook et al., 2015; Reynolds & Vince (Eds.), 2004; Taylor & White, 2000). The pragmatism of John Dewey (2009) in particular, along with Donald Schön's seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner* (1991) provide a reference point for most of these writings.

While there are numerous nuanced definitions of concepts like reflection, reflexivity, reflective practice and critical reflections in this extensive literature, this article differentiates between two types of reflection: *instrumental* and *critical reflections.*

Instrumental reflections involve defining 'what the problem is about' and seeking solutions and best practice (Caswell & Dall, 2022b, Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004; Taylor & White, 2000). They assume that problems can be relatively well-defined, and that reflecting logically about the problem will lead to improved solutions.

On the other hand, critical reflections entail exploring different perspectives analytically about a problem or a case, and in this process using concepts, theories and different kinds of knowledge to reformulate problem understanding, discover new perspectives, innovate services, reflect on blind spots, language, assumptions and the use of personal and institutional categories. Reflection, in this understanding, "is more than simply thinking about experience. It involves a deeper look at the premises on which thinking, actions and emotions are based" (Fook & Gardner, 2007: 14). It is also about thinking out loud without jumping too soon to conclusions and action. In the words of Cressesy et al. (2006:23) "[r]eflection is a discursive way of creating a space for focusing on problematic situations and of holding them for consideration without premature rush to judgement".

It is here not a question of which kinds of reflections are best per se, but which kinds of reflections are best suited to cope with which kinds of problem situations. Put in a simple way, wicked problems demand more critical reflections, whereas instrumental reflections may be well-suited for finding solutions to tame problems. Most of these writings on critical reflections follow Dewey's central claim that concepts, theories and hypotheses should be seen as *tools* measured by their usefulness in dealing practically with the world. 'Knowing is literally something we do' (Dewey in Hildebrand, 2013: 58). If an idea makes a practical difference, it is, in a pragmatic sense, true. The focus is not on determining what is 'objectively true' about a situation, but on identifying understandings that best assist professionals. 'Therefore, the "debate is not about whether things are real – of course they are real – but about what kind of devices we use to decide between competing versions of the "truth", or "reality", or events' (Taylor & White, 2000: 178).

Despite this abundant literature on reflective practice, there are still relatively few empirical studies on how professionals do reflections in organisational settings. Exceptions include studies of health service professionals and teachers in various settings (i.e. Billet & Newton (2010), Fook & Gardner (2007, 2013), Nicolini et al. (2004), West (2010) and Taylor & White (2000)), but reflective practice in public employment services has been largely unexamined, with a few recent exceptions (Caswell & Dall, 2022b; Kongsgaard, 2022).

Methods, data and analytical strategy

The backdrop for the analyses of this paper comes from ethnographic fieldwork conducted as part of a larger study investigating how various organisational conditions promote or hinder organisational reflexivity (Kongsgaard, 2022). The study involved five months of fieldwork in a Danish public employment service supplemented with observations of 12 knowledge-mobilising workshops (see Andersen et al., 2017) in another four employment services. All services targeted clients with complex health and social-related issues alongside unemployment. The core task of the PES professionals was to facilitate the return of vulnerable clients into the labour market, and to do assessments of employability. To achieve these goals, they did frequent interviews with clients, facilitated integrated services with, e.g., health professionals, social workers, mentors, etc., referred the clients to supported employment programmes, internships at companies, coping courses and other services. The professional background of the PES professionals varied, including social workers, pedagogues, occupational therapists, salesmen, laboratory technicians, etc. This is typical of the Danish PES. There is no 'activation profession' or occupation having sole jurisdiction in the PES. Therefore, these professionals do not per se share common occupational, theoretical or methodological language or knowledge base. I will return to this point later in the findings.

Data collection involved interviews, participation in more than 100 formal and informal organisational meetings and observations of daily practices within an open-plan office. Thus, much data comes from daily deliberations amongst the street-level professionals discussing clients, issues and dilemmas at their desk, which is where 'the "problem of street-level bureaucrats" is located' (e.g. Hupe et al., 2015). The number of professionals participating in these meetings varied between two and 15. I followed a participant-observation strategy (Hastrup, 2015; Spradley, 1980), changing between merely observing and sometimes taking part in these organisational deliberations. Fieldnotes were extensively written, incorporating scratch notes, detailed descriptions of interaction and memory-supporting notes (inspired by e.g. Emerson et al. (Eds.), 2011; Hastrup, 2015; Sanjek, 1990). While the organisations did not permit audio recording, the notes were relied on for data analysis (only interviews were recorded). Hence, the data cannot be used as

verbatim evidence of exactly what was said. However, notes were meticulously taken during meetings to capture as exact wordings as possible. Furthermore, I have hypotheses and quotes with the street-level bureaucrats to increase the robustness of the data.

All participants were informed about the research, and gave their consent to my participation. The data has been thoroughly anonymised. The cases presented in the article are condensed, and slightly altered to ensure anonymity.

The analysis of the data material has been conducted abductively (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) in an iterative process of data collection and application of various theoretical perspectives throughout the research process. The study did not aim to validate or refute a specific theory of reflective practice, nor did it adopt an entirely inductive approach. Instead, the study applied 'disciplined attention' (Hastrup, 2015: 56), using the concept of reflective practice as a sensitising concept (Blumer, 1954) to help understand how task-related dilemmas were discussed being impacted by organisational conditions. In this process, I stumbled (Brinkmann, 2014) on a number of conditions impacting reflective practices. One of these conditions had to do with the types of reasoning being used in the reflections, which is the focus of this article.

As part of the observations of meetings where employment professionals reflected on various job dilemmas, an empirically and inductively driven typology called 'domains of reasoning' was developed. Inspiration comes from Qvortrup and Keiding (2014), who, inspired by the work of Luhmann, have looked into teachers' reasonings in the planning and evaluation of teaching. 'Domain of reasoning' was used heuristically to categorise references in reflective processes to various kinds of considerations, knowledge and rationales with a certain similarity. For example, references to statements and examinations from 'health professionals' constituted one such domain, whereas references to the professionals' own experience constituted another such domain. The naming of each domain was changed several times during fieldwork. Thus, the categories do not represent fixed categories, but should be seen as thinking tools. Furthermore, the domains were not mutually exclusive, and their use was counted only for a specific fieldwork period. A total of 10 different domains

were identified, and the frequency of each domain's use was noted. The naming and frequency findings were discussed with the professionals on several occasions to help validate the findings with their experience.

The 10 domains are presented and ordered as to the frequency of their use in the table below. The following sections will focus on only the four most used domains as representatives of instrumental reflections, and the least-used domain as a case of critical reflective practice. The remaining five domains will remain uncommented in this paper. It must be emphasised that there is no inherent reason that a specific domain should belong to either instrumental or critical reflections. However, as the analysis will show, it turned out that instances of instrumental reflections by far outnumbered instances of critical reflection.

Frequency	Domain of reasoning	Explanation
Most used	**Legislation**	References to legislation, process-regulations etc.
	The system	References to waiting time, resources, benchmarks, governance, working routines, cooperation with other sectors, etc.
	Health professionals	References to 'medical knowledge' and statements primarily from physicians, psychiatrists and psychologists, and to some extent from other health professionals like physiotherapists, occupational therapists, etc.
	What works research	References to various quantitative, and often RCT, experimental studies designed to show an average outcome of various interventions like interviews, coping-courses, mentorship, supported employment, etc.
Sometimes used	**Individual client characteristics**	References to specific characteristics of a client like client statements, family background, health issues, etc.
	Personal values and convictions	References to the professional's own values and convictions about morals and fairness.
	Professionals' experience	References to the professionals' experience with similar cases.
	Labour market characteristics	References to, for instance, specific workplaces, match opportunities, etc.
	Organisational values and policy	References to national and local policy and organisational values.
Least used	**Research-based concepts and theories**	References to theories, research and professional concepts about, for instance, human behaviour, motivation, match processes, dilemmas, client participation, communication, relational work, employability, etc.

The normative aim of this research extends beyond mere critique and exposure; it seeks to rebuild by means of a reparative critique (Monrad & Grünfeld, 2017). Thus, the research should not only describe, criticise, or analyze practice and contribute to more scientific knowledge, but also help the practice field develop reflexivity. Following the proponents of abductive analyses (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), the domains were discussed throughout the research process with 'communities of inquiry' (ibid.) involving not only researchers but also the professionals under study. Such critical reflections themselves serve as examples of how critical reflections can be conducted within the context of public employment services. True to the pragmatic foundation of critical reflections the domains of reasoning were not presented as generalisable facts about practice but as tools for thinking further about practice.

Looking for 'what to do': Instrumental reflections

Legislation

References to legislation emerge as one of the most frequently used domains of reasoning. In these reflections, the professionals cited various demands typically outlined in the law governing active employment services. For instance, the law may stipulate specific services (e.g. internship, interviews, etc.) within set deadlines, or the collection of specific documentation case processing. The following excerpt from a case supervision shows one example of such references to the law. Case worker A has brought up a case for discussion. It is about a client with complex health issues. The case worker has tried various interventions without much success, and seeks help from his seven colleagues in the team:

Excerpt 1: References to legislation

Case worker A: I am not sure what to do now about this client. It is a little complicated.

Case worker B: Well, you should at least call her in for an interview.

Case worker A: I already talked a lot with her. There is no need for further interviews.

Case worker C: You still need to call her in. We are lacking behind to meet the demands of the frequency of interviews [as stated in the legislation].

Case worker A: If there is nothing new to talk about, I am not calling clients in for interviews. Otherwise, we will be back at this circus of interviews we had previously.

Case worker B: There is always something to talk about.

> Case worker A: I don't agree.
>
> Case worker B: Yes, you can always talk about job applications.
>
> Case worker C: Right now, we are not talking about the content of the interviews, but about meeting legislative demands. Therefore, you need to call her in.

Knowing the details and many regulations of the Danish Law of Active Employment Service, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the professionals referred so frequently to legislation. However, what stood out was how legislation was not only a backdrop for decisions, but was actively and very often used as the final argument of what action to take. Rather than serving as a framework to guide discretion, legislation appeared to function as a decisive 'trump card' in determining 'what to do' closing down the complexity of a case by providing a straightforward suggestion for action. This is seen in the excerpt, where bringing the client in for an interview is suggested to meet legislative demands, instead of, for instance, exploring case worker A's doubt about both the meaningfulness of further interviews, and of what else to do concerning the client.

The system

'The system' is here used as a broad category of references to organisational conditions and demands, including waiting lists, task divisions, resource allocation, available services (client interventions), benchmarks etc. These reflections were primarily concerned with determining 'what to do' to meet system requirements. For example, professionals might advise colleagues to increase the use of on-the-job training for clients due to a department's declining benchmark on this specific parameter or encourage each other to enroll clients in a mindfulness course to meet capacity. The following short excerpt shows how considerations of internal organisation overruled considerations of what might be best for both the client and the desired outcomes. We are at a team meeting in the team working with clients furthest away from the labor market. The task is to bring about integrated services and help clients enter the labor market through ordinary jobs or supported employment or help clients receive early retirement.

Excerpt 2: References to the system

Case worker A: I am really happy. The client I have been working so hard with finally got permission for a fleksjob[2]. I have been working very hard with the workplace that has helped her through the clarification process. I wish I could help land the fleksjob at the same workplace as well. I have a really good relationship with the employer.

Case worker B: Well, you cannot do that. Your job is done, and you have done really well. Congratulations. You will have to refer her to the fleksjob team [another section with the specific task of helping clients in to fleksjob].

Caseworker A: But we know that there is a waiting list. It could be 2-3 weeks before she gets a letter from them. I don't think the employer can wait that long. We also know that waiting is one the things that demotivates people in these circumstances. Isn't there some way around this? Can't I just do it?

Caseworker C: You have done what you could, and you should not stretch yourself any further. Also, your client cannot skip the waiting list. We have other clients waiting for help as well.

In this excerpt caseworker A realises that there is a risk of the client not getting the fleksjob due to a waiting list. The case worker argues that waiting might be detrimental to the final aim of work inclusion (referring to both experience- and research-based knowledge), but this reflection is somehow trumped by case worker B and C's references to 'the system'. The excerpt serves as an illustration and a typical example of the many times, where references to system considerations, like references to legislation, were brought into the reflections to somehow close down dilemmas, and end discussions of 'what to do'. While legislation refers to an external domain, references to 'the system' pertain to an internal domain concerning the organisation's structure and governance.

Health professionals

References to health professionals constituted a third domain of reasoning. Many clients were treated by doctors, physiotherapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, etc., producing various kinds of documents describing the health issues, the treatments, assessments and prognoses of possible recovery. In the reflections, statements like 'you need to run him [the client] by the doctor', 'we need to get something medical [i.e. a medical assessment]' or 'let's hear what the psychologist says' were often

[2] Fleksjob is a form of supported employment for people with a permanent lower work capacity due to health issues. They receive a full salary, part of it being paid by the State (up to a certain level), but work fewer hours or less intensively.

heard. The following dialogue between a caseworker and a supervisor, in the same team (as above) working clients with complex health issues, illustrates this. The dialogue unfolds after they have talked about various dilemmas and interpretations of a case with a client suffering from complex mental issues:

> **Excerpt 3: References to health professionals**
>
> Case worker: Right now, I just hope that the doctor will send something good [meaning a written medical report).
>
> Supervisor: What do you mean by sending something good? Shouldn't the doctor just send a report of what he has found?
>
> Case worker: Yes of course, but I need something that is well documented. Something that is 'black or white'.

The client in the case had so far gone through several services like on-the-job-training, interviews, and a coping course, but it was still unclear what would help the client best. As I interpret it, the case worker therefore hopes that the doctor can help with this predicament, and produce some kind of firm evidence of what to do next, something black or white. I witnessed such hopes for the 'black or white' dilemma closing medical statements in many dialogues. However, most of the medical assessments that I looked in to were not 'black or white', but written in many shades, and often quite inconclusive of what to do and what the problem was all about.

What-works research

References to 'what-works research' constituted the fourth frequently used domain of reasoning. This domain primarily encompassed various experimental designs modelled according to RCT (*Randomised Controlled Trial*) requirements or register-based studies (where different interventions have been assessed according to efficiency and effectiveness based on register data), which have been dominant in knowledge production commissioned by the Ministry of Employment (Andersen, 2020). Professionals would often simplify such research findings into statements like 'xx works'. In the data, this domain was heard in statements like 'we know that internship is the most efficient way to get people into jobs', 'you must remember that "Interviews work"'or 'You should work more with your belief in the client, as we know that belief works'. Of course, not all statements of 'We know that xx works' referred to such research. Statements like, e.g., 'We know that a good relationship with the client is important' does not refer to specific studies of PES, but can instead be seen as an

instance of referring to shared values and convictions. Furthermore, direct references to 'what-works research' were rarely heard explicitly (i.e. the professionals were seldom referring to a specific study). In this domain, I have therefore only included statements that, in my interpretation, referred to a shared knowledge in the Danish PES sector stemming from what-works research. More specifically, this especially included references to the positive effects of interviews (Rosholm & Svarer, 2010), internships (Rosholm et al., 2018) and the professionals' belief in the clients' job prospects (Bodilsen et al., 2023; Rosholm et al., 2017).

The following excerpt from a case supervision shows this. Case worker A has just presented her predicament to her fellow teammates. She would like to help the client progress, but she is at the same time worried that she might push the client too fast and too much right now. Her dilemma is about pushing or shielding the client:

Excerpt 4: References to what-work research

Case worker A: I am in doubt of what could be a good next step for my client. She is suffering from depression and anxiety.

Case worker B: Well, we know that internship works, so that might be a good next step for her.
Case worker A: Yes, I know, but she has previously participated in an internship that didn't go very well. I am worried that she will suffer another defeat.

Manager: We also know that our belief in clients' job prospect works. As professionals, we must show the clients that we believe in their chances of getting into internship and jobs.

Here, case worker B and the manager refer to various what-works-research, which they, in my interpretation, use as a dilemma the closing arguments of what to do now, whereas the experience of the client or the ambiguity of case worker A are not explored any further. The knowledge from this domain is based on research-produced knowledge about the average effects of various services, methods or mechanisms.

Seeking certainty under conditions of complexity

To sum up, the PES professionals were more prone to instrumental reflections, emphasising the closure of dilemmas, making judgements and suggesting actions than on critical reflection, and with an emphasis on exploring dilemmas and ambiguities. I interpret this as a search for certainty, equivocality and a secure

foundation for decision-making. By referring to external sources like the letter of the law, systemic and organisational requirements, the knowledge of another profession (health professionals) or the 'facts of research', the professionals in these instances sought to close down dilemmas and uncertainties, and provide guidelines for the 'right way' to go forward. Nonetheless, such a search for certainty runs contrary to the core of a job filled with dilemmas and complexities. Here, I follow Taylor and White's (2000: 5) warning that:

> [S]uch a search for certainty and truth can apply only to discrete components of professional [in social and health professions] activity, the remainder of which is characterised by uncertainty and complex qualitative judgments. We aim to demonstrate that, armed with the comfortable belief that they have certain knowledge, health and welfare professionals may be less likely to reflect appropriately on their judgements and decision making, thus making error more, rather than less, likely. (Taylor & White, 2000: 5)

In other words, there is a risk of neglecting the real dilemmas and complexities facing the front-line workers. My research confirms what other scholars have also pointed out, i.e., many welfare organisations and professionals have difficulties in tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty, and therefore instead 'jump to solutions and suggestions for action' (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Swan, 2008) in a search for 'the objective truth' about a case based on 'pure facts' (Fook & Gardner, 2007; West, 2010). However, such a search for certainty must be understood in relation to the specific context of PES. It has been well described how the Danish employment services (and arguably the employment services of many other countries) have been governed and structured around a logic of 'production' (Andersen, 2020; Andersen et al., 2022; Caswell et al., 2018; Larsen, 2022; Monrad & Danneris, 2022), where employment service professionals and organisations have been evaluated more as to whether they succeeded in delivering the right number of activities (e.g. interviews, internships, etc.), and less on the final outcomes of labour market inclusion. Overall, the attention of professionals in this field has therefore been directed more towards meeting process requirements, and doing well in benchmarks, than towards meeting clients' need or towards bringing about the best possible results concerning job inclusion.[3] If there is some truth in such claims, it is perhaps no wonder that the

[3] Of course, such a claim needs nuances and is difficult to prove. I am in no way claiming that the public employment service organisations, managers and professionals have not been occupied with delivering good results. My claim, based on research and many years in the field, is that the widespread wish to help people in vulnerable life situations into jobs has been overshadowed by the above-mentioned 'production demands'. The individual front-line

reflections at the frontline also seem to belong to a logic of production, where professionals become more oriented towards 'doing the right thing' than of seeking out new perspectives (Fook & Gardner, 2007).

Developing critical reflections in frontline organisations

In line with the ambition of a reparative critique that contributes to constructing new practices (Monrad & Grünfeld, 2017: 131), two instances of critical reflective practices will be explored. Though infrequent, such critical reflections did take place on several occasions. In the following two examples, the critical perspective was facilitated by the introduction of research-based concepts and theories, the least used domain of reasoning.

The first example comes from a workshop where PES professionals were learning how to use *Conversational Analysis* (CA) (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). In collaboration with researchers, the professionals were introduced to the framework and key concepts of CA, and guided how to explore and analyse audio recording of their own professional conversations, with unemployed clients paying specific attention to basic concepts of CA like turns of talk, participants' orientations etc. (see Caswell & Dall, 2022a,b). In the following excerpt, the professionals discuss a transcription of one such conversation between a client and one of the professionals:

Excerpt 5: Conversational analysis as an instance of critical reflection

Case worker 1: "Ok, I am just trying now. Here in line 7 (pointing to the transcription), there is something about pronouns. She [the case worker being analysed] uses the pronoun 'we' about the job centre, not 'I'.

Case worker 2: 'Later on (pointing), she actually says 'I' in a sentence, where she tells how she can help the client".

Case worker 3: 'So, it looks as if she is using "we" to avoid taking responsibility of what she is saying, when she is talking about sanctioning the client.'

Case worker 2: 'Yes, you could say that she is distancing herself from this decision [sanctioning the client].'

Case worker 1: 'And she shouldn't be distancing herself from the decision. She ought to stand up for it.'

worker is of course motivated by doing well. The problem has been that 'doing well' has been more about performing well on the indicators than performing well on the end results.

> Case worker 4: [laughing] 'Hold on. I think we just evaluated the conversation. And we are not allowed to do so.'
>
> Case worker 1: [also laughing]: 'Oops, you are right. It is really quite difficult not to make that mistake [to evaluate].'

As part of the CA training, the case workers had learned about pronouns and how in CA they can be understood as signals of affiliation, distance etc., and they had also learned that it is a basic rule in CA to analyse and not evaluate the conversation. I take this (and similar examples) as instances of conducting critical reflections. Instead of searching for the truth, looking for certainty, making judgements or giving suggestions for action, the professionals here explore various interpretations and helpful perspectives. They do so by means of established concepts, theories and methodologies that help them reflect critically about the problem situation. Though the theory of CA is not rooted in the theories of reflective practice, the framework is in this case applied to develop critical reflexivity aimed at bringing in new perspectives, and challenging established assumptions (e.g. the way pronouns are used).

The CA example illustrates how an explicit theoretical framework can be used to develop critical thinking. The following example from the data shows how critical reflective practice can take place without explicit reference to a specific theoretical framework. Instead, various professional concepts are applied to bring in new perspectives on a case. The excerpt is from a team meeting, with the purpose of bringing up cases for mutual reflection:

> **Excerpt 6. Using concepts to enhance critical reflections**
>
> Case worker A: I work with this guy who is bipolar. He keeps changing plans. I have seen the same pattern working with other bipolar clients. I keep finding new places for on-the-job training that fit his wishes, but after a few days he quits them and wants something else. I don't know what to do.
>
> Case worker B: I know that feeling. However, I am not sure if the problem has to do with him being bipolar. It could be. But it could also just be due to the vulnerable life situation he is in. From *motivational theory* there is this concept of 'ambiguity' stating that when people don't change it might be because they both want and don't want to change. They are caught in ambiguity
>
> Case worker C: I am thinking about the concept of 'time'. For people to change, time is needed. It doesn't happen overnight.
>
> Case worker D: I recognise this dilemma between following the client's wishes and holding on to a plan even though the client wants to change it again. Who should be the expert here, you or the client?

> Case worker A: Hearing you, I start wondering if the problem has anything to do with his diagnosis, and I wonder if I have pushed a little too hard due to my own eagerness to make a plan. I need to think more about it.

In this example, the case workers introduce more or less established theoretical concepts to bring in new perspectives. They challenge the (presumed) assumption that the client's problems must be understood in reference to his borderline diagnosis. They explore the case, keep the dilemmas open and avoid fixed judgments. Of course, there is no way of telling if the references to, e.g., time, ambiguity and expert position are in fact references to shared professional understandings of specific concepts and theories. However, based on my observations and knowledge of the organisation, I claim that the reference to motivational theory and ambiguity was indeed a reference to the concept of *motivational interviewing* (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), and that the references to time (to change) and expert position referred to previous discussions of these concepts in former meetings. Though such instances of bringing in concepts were relatively rare, they showcase the potential for using theories and concepts to bring in new perspectives, challenge assumptions, and thus develop critical reflective practices.

Conclusion and discussion

Assisting individuals in vulnerable life situations involves intricate challenges and uncertainties, demanding professionals to engage in collegial reflections on not only what to do, but on how to understand problem situations of the job. Based on empirical data from the Danish public employment services, I find that: (a) the professionals were more prone to instrumental reflections, focusing on judgements and directions for action than on critical reflections exploring dilemmas and new perspectives. References to seemingly objective facts like legislation, system requirements, health professionals and what-works research constituted such instances of instrumental reflections, which can be seen as a search for certainty and actionable solutions to complex problems. Furthermore, I find that: (b) though much less frequently professionals also engaged in critical reflective practices. They did so, in particular, by bringing in research based- and professional concepts to help in exploring new perspectives, and challenging established assumptions. These instances indicate the potential for developing more peer-level critical reflective

practices within such organisations. These findings add to our understanding of the institutional and organisational embeddedness of reflective practice, and to bridging the theories of reflective practice with the specific practice field of public employment services for people with complex health- and social issues.

More research is needed into the many local conditions, respectively, impeding and promoting the development of critically reflective organisations. In this paper, I have suggested that the dominance of instrumental reflections can be understood in the specific context of employment services characterised by a 'logic of production'. Other conditions such as organisational pace, the widespread use of performance indicators, managerial support, professional background, collegial environment, governance and concrete training and competences most likely have a bearing on the kinds and quality of the reflections taking place (see Kongsgaard, 2022 for elaboration on some of these arguments). Further exploring the contextual availability and use of categories, concepts, and theories as tools for reflection within a given community of practice can provide valuable insights (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009; Dewey, 2009; Eikeland & Nicolini, 2011).

True to the pragmatic roots of reflective practice, the aim is not to conclude whether a theory or concept is true in any objective or ontological sense, but whether it is helpful in bringing in new understandings, hence making a difference in dealing with problem situations of the job. This is not to say that any theory or concept is just as good as any other, as practice is the test to the helpfulness of the concept. This might seem like a philosophical digression, but such a pragmatic perspective shifts the focus from determining the ultimate truth, applying the right theory, or finding the right course of action to understand and construct problems, cases and situations in ways that facilitate professional learning and hopefully bring about better outcomes. Such problem constructions take place both directly in professional-client interactions (Messmer & Hitzler, 2008: 37) and 'behind the scenes' in interprofessional interactions, i.e., in organisational reflective practices.

References

Abbott, A. (1988). *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226189666.001.0001

Andersen, N. (2020). *Evidensbaseret beskæftigelsespolitik. Et studie af evalueringer, magt og offentlig politikudvikling.* Aalborg Universitetsforlag. https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/files/549571239/PHD_Niklas_Andreas_Andersen_E_pdf.pdf

Andersen, N. A., Caswell, D. & Madsen, M. B. (2022). Vidensgrundlaget for Beskæftigelsespolitikken - Fra Vidensoverførsel Til Vidensmobilisering. In D. Caswell & F. Larsen (Eds.), *Borgerinddragelse i Beskæftigelsespolitikken* (pp. 177-212). Djøf Forlag.

Andersen, N., Caswell, D. & Larsen, F. (2017). A New Approach to Helping the Hard to Place Unemployed: The Promise of Developing New Knowledge in an Interactive and Collaborative Process. *European Journal of Social Security, 19*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/1388262717745193

Askeland, G. A. & Fook, J. (2009). Critical Reflection in Social Work. *European Journal of Social Work, 12*(3), 287-292. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450903100851

Béres, L. & Fook, J. (Eds.) (2019). *Learning Critical Reflection: Experiences of the Transformative Learning Process*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351033305

Billet, S. & Newton, J. (2010). Conceptualising Professional Lifelong Learning for the Health-Care Sector. In H. Bradbury, N. Frost, S. Kilminster & M. Zukas (Eds.), *Beyond Reflective Practice: New Approaches to Professional Lifelong Learning* (pp. 52-65). Routledge.

Blumer, H. (1954). What is Wrong with Social Theory? *American Sociological Review, 19*(5), 3-10. https://doi.org/10.2307/2088165

Bodilsen, S. T., Nielsen, S. A. & Rosholm, M. (2023). *Measuring Employment Readiness for Hard-to-Place Individuals.* IZA Institute of Labor Economics. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4646348

Boud, D., Cressey, P. & Docherty, P. (Eds.) (2006). *Productive Reflections at Work*. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203001745

Bradbury, H., Frost, N., Zukas, M. & Kilminster, S. (2010). *Beyond Reflective Practice: New Approaches to Professional Lifelong Learning*. Routledge.

Brinkmann, S. (2014). Doing without Data. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(6), 720-725. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530254

Brodkin, E. Z. (2017). Street-Level Organizations and US Workfare. In R. van Berkel, D. Caswell, P. Kubka & F. Larsen (Eds.), *Frontline Delivery of Welfare-to-Work Policies in Europe* (pp. 36-52). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315694474-3

Caswell, D. (2018). Praksislogikker - Et Kompas for Handling. In L. T. Kongsgaard & M. H. Rod (Eds.), *Bedre Begrundet Praksis* (pp. 163-182). Samfundslitteratur.

Caswell, D. & Dall, T. (2022a). Potentialet i Det Borgerinddragende Møde Og Samtalen. In D. Caswell & F. Larsen (Eds.), *Borgerinddragelse i Beskæftigelsespolitikken* (pp. 149-176). København: Djøf Forlag.

Caswell, D. & Dall, T. (2022b). Using Conversation Analysis to Develop Reflective Practice in Social Work. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice, 21*(6), 1290-1307. https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250221124210

Caswell, D., Kupka, P., Larsen, F. & van Berkel, R. (2017). The Frontline Delivery of Welfare-to-Work in Context. Activating the Unemployed. In R. van Berkel, D. Caswell, P. Kupka & F. Larsen (Eds.), *The Frontline Delivery of Welfare-to-Work in Context* (pp. 1-11). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315694474-1

Caswell, D. & Larsen, F. (Eds.) (2022). *Borgerinddragelse i Beskæftigelsespolitikken*. København: DJØF/Jurist- og Økonomforbundets Forlag.

Caswell, D., Larsen, F., van Berkel, R. & Kupka, P. (2017). Conclusions and Topics for Future Research. In R. van Berkel, D. Caswell, P. Kupka & F. Larsen (Eds.), *Frontline Delivery of Welfare-to-Work Policies in Europe. Activating the Unemployed* (pp. 181-200). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315694474-11

Cornish, F. & Gillespie, A. (2009). A Pragmatist Approach to the Problem of Knowledge in Health Psychology. *Journal of Health Psychology, 14*(6), 800-809. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105309338974

Cressey, P., Boud, D. & Docherty, P. (2006). The Emergence of Productive Reflection. In D. Boud, P. Cressey & P. Docherty (Eds.), *Productive Reflections at Work. Learning for Changing Organizations* (pp. 11-26). Routledge.

Cunliffe, A. & Easterby-Smith, M. P. V. (2004). From Reflection to Practical Reflexivity: Experiential Learning as Lived Experience. In M. Reynolds & R. Vince (Eds.), *Organizing Reflection* (pp. 30-46). Ashgate Publishing.

Dewey, J. (2009). *How we Think*. BN Publishing.

Eikeland, O. & Nicolini, D. (2011). Turning Practically: Broadening the Horizon. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 24*(2), 164-174. https://doi.org/10.1108/09534811111119744

Emerson, R., M., Fretz, R., I. & Shaw, L. L. (Eds.) (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226206868.001.0001

Fook, J. (2010). Beyond Reflective Practice. Reworking the 'critical' in Critical Reflection. In H. Bradbury, N. Frost, S. Kilminster & M. Zukas (Eds.), *Beyond Reflective Practice: New Approaches to Professional Lifelong Learning* (pp. 37-51). Routledge.

Fook, J. & Gardner, F. (2007). *Practising Critical Reflection: A Resource Handbook*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Fook, J. & Gardner, F. (2013). *Critical Reflection in Context: Applications in Health and Social Care*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203094662

Harmon, M. M. & Mayer, R. (1986). *Organization Theory for Public Administration*. Scott, Foresman and Company.

Hastrup, K. (2015). Feltarbejde. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard (Eds.), *Kvalitative Metoder - En Grundbog* (pp. 55-80). Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Head, B. W. & Alford, J. (2015). Wicked Problems: Implications for Public Policy and Management. *Administration & Society, 47*(6), 711-739. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399713481601

Hildebrand, D. (2013). Dewey's Pragmatism: Instrumentalism and Meliorism. In A. Malachowski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism* (pp. 55-80). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139022132.006

Hupe, P., Hill, M. & Buffat, A. (2015). Introduction: Defining and Understanding Street-Level Bureaucracy. In P. Hupe, M. Hill & A. Buffat (Eds.), *Understanding Street-Level Bureaucracy* (1st ed., pp. 3-24) Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89bw0.5

Kongsgaard, L. T. (2022). *Faglig refleksiv praksis. en undersøgelse af organisatorisk dilemmahåndtering og refleksivitet i velfærdsarbejdets frontlinje* [Doctoral dissertaion]. Aalborg University. https://doi.org/10.54337/aau495040168

Larsen, F. (2022). Borgerinddragelse for Udsatte Borgere i Beskæftigelsespolitikken - Potentialer Og Dilemmaer. In D. Caswell & F. Larsen (Eds.), *Borgerinddragelse i Beskæftigelsespolitikken* (pp. 15-34). København: Djøf Forlag.

Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (30th. anniversary expanded ed.). Russell Sage Foundation.

Messmer, H. & Hitzler, S. (2008). Practice-Based Evidence – Social Work Viewed from an Interactions Analysis Perspective. In I. M. Bryderup (Ed.), *Evidence Based and Knowledge Based Social Work* (pp. 33-52). Aarhus University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv62hgxk.4

Miller, W. R. & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Molander, A. & Grimen, H. (2010). Understanding Professional Discretion. In L. G. Svensson & J. Evetts (Eds.), *Sociology of Professions: Continental and Anglo-Saxon Traditions.* (pp. 167-187). Daidalos.

Monrad, M. & Danneris, S. (2022). Borgerinddragelse Som Fænomen. In D. Caswell & F. Larsen (Eds.), *Borgerinddragelse i Beskæftigelsespolitikken* (pp. 35-66). Djøf Forlag.

Monrad, M. & Grünfeld, M. (2017). Disagreement as Reparative Critique in the Development of Social Work Practice. In K. Høgsbro & I. Shaw (Eds.), *Social Work and Research in Advanced Welfare States* (pp. 131-141). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315279015-10

Nicolini, D., Sher, M., Childerstone, S. & Gorli, M. (2004). In Search of the 'Structure that Reflects': Promoting Organizational Reflection Practices in a UK Health Authority. In M. Reynolds & R. Vince (Eds.), *Organizing Reflection* (pp. 81-104). Ashgate Publishing.

Nielsen, M. H. & Monrad, M. (2023). Client Participation and Conditionality: Navigating Conflicting Normative Demands in Employment Services. *Administration & Society, 55*(5). https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997231157750

Qvortrup, A. & Keiding, T. B. (2014). Undervisningens Vidensdomæner: Erfaring, Didaktik Og Uddannelsesvidenskab. *Dansk Universitetspædagogisk Tidsskrift, 9*(17), 6-19. https://doi.org/10.7146/dut.v9i17.9722

Reynolds, M. & Vince, R. (2004). Organizing Reflection: An Introduction. In M. Reynolds & R. Vince (Eds.), *Organizing Reflection* (pp. 1-14). Ashgate Publishing.

Rittel, H. & Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences; Integrating Knowledge and Practice to Advance Human Dignity, 4*(2), 155-169. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730

Rosholm, M., Sørensen, K. L., Skipper, L. & Nielsen, S. (2018). *Aktiv beskæftigelsesindsats og progression.*Væksthusets Forksningscenter. https://www.vaeksthuset.dk/parallelle-sammenhaengende-indsatser-faar-udsatte-taettere-paa-arbejdsmarkedet/

Rosholm, M. & Svarer, M. (2010). *Effekter af samtaler i den aktive arbejdsmarkedspolitik.* Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering. https://www.star.dk/media/1342/effekter-af-samtaler-i-den-aktive-arbejdsmarkedspolitik.pdf

Sanjek, R. (1990). *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501711954

Schön, D. A. (1991). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (11th repr. ed.). Avebury Ashgate.

Sidnell, J. & Stivers, T. (2013). *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325001

Smeby, J. (2013). Profesjon Og Ekspertise. In A. Molander & J. Smeby (Eds.), *Profesjonsstudier II* (pp. 17-26). Universitetsforlaget.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant Observation*. Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Swan, E. (2008). Let's Not Get Too Personal: Critical Reflection, Reflexivity and the Confessional Turn. *Journal of European Industrial Training, 32*(5), 385-399. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090590810877102

Tavory, I. & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive Analysis. Theorizing Qualitative Research*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226180458.001.0001

Taylor, C. & White, S. (2000). *Practising Reflexivity in Health and Welfare. Making Knowledge.* Open University Press.

Timmermans, S. & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis. *Sociological Theory, 30*(3), 167-186. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914

West, L. (2010). Really Reflexive Practice. Auto/Biographical Research and Struggles for a Critical Reflexivity. In H. Bradbury, N. Frost, M. Zukas & S. Kilminster (Eds.), *Beyond Reflective Practice: New Approaches to Professional Lifelong Learning* (pp. 66-82). Routledge.

Zacka, B. (2017). *When the State Meets the Street. Public Service and Moral Agency*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674981423