Article

Is it all about the money? - a study of specialized frontline work in the Norwegian social assistance service

by

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Abstract

This article is about meetings between frontline workers in the Norwegian labour and welfare administration (NAV), and young people outside work or school - NEETs. This group often has few or no financial rights beyond financial social assistance, which is granted from the social services in NAV. One of NAV's intentions is to ensure a work-oriented focus and comprehensive follow-up across various benefits. Based on a qualitative study in five NAV offices, the article investigates how organizational measures, in this case the specialization of work tasks, seek to put work-oriented aspects in the foreground of service provision and separate it from traditional casework on benefit decisions.

The study consists of 14 observations of conversations between frontline workers and young social assistance recipients. Additionally, five focus group interviews were conducted with the frontline workers. The findings suggest that the frontline workers' follow-up appears fragmented, so that these young people can end up with up to three frontline workers at the same time, who are respectively responsible for finances, work and follow-up. This specialization can have implications for the quality of the service provision, and it seems that the nature and dynamics of social problems are not taken into account.

Introduction

To counteract a specialized frontline service structure and strengthen the emphasis on activation policy, social assistance and public employment services are integrated in many countries with the aim of increased employment (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016; Minas, 2014; OECD, 2018; van der Wel et al., 2021). Social assistance has also changed from mainly functioning as a safety net for residents who find it difficult to support themselves financially, to increasingly being linked to a greater ambition to keep the population active and in paid work (Aust & Arriba, 2005; Barbier & Mayerhofer, 2004; Cox, 1998; Erlien, 2017; Lødemel & Trickey, 2001).

The Norwegian public administration reform in 2006 resulted in the merger of the two government agencies – the Public Employment Service and the Social Security Agency – which partnered and co-located with the municipal social services into new labour and welfare administration offices (NAV). As in other countries, the purpose of NAV is to ensure better coordinated services for vulnerable groups, and a clearer work-oriented focus. In the municipal social assistance service, decisions related to benefits are made at the local office, in contrast to decisions on social security benefits (the 'state side), which are made by regional administrative back offices outside the local office.

Reaching and engaging young people outside work or school represents a significant challenge for public policy in many countries (Ellena et al., 2024, p. 1), with reducing the number of NEETs being a major policy priority in the European Union (Redmond & McFadden, 2023, p. 285). Although the number is below average compared to other countries, NEETs in Norway are characterized by a large proportion who are inactive. This applies to seven out of 10 Norwegian NEETs, who do not work or study and are not looking for work either. This group is closer to long-term exclusion than the unemployed, and is also not in regular contact with public services (OECD, 2018, p. 13). NEETs basically include those who are not in contact with the public sector, i.e., do not receive benefits. We use the term to also refer to unemployed young people who receive help from NAV (Strand & Svalund, 2021, p. 28). We highlight the importance of the bureaucratic and institutional context for the service offered to this target group.

The article is based on interviews and observations of frontline workers in the social services in NAV, and what unfolds in their meeting with young welfare clients who are not in education or work (NEET). In recent decades, research into social assistance has focused on the organization of the service, but few studies have a 'combined view' of content and organization (Erlien, 2017, p. 223). The frontline workers have to balance between regulations, available resources and the office's practice. In order to be able to meet the complex needs of people who receive financial social assistance, the Act on Social Services in NAV allows for a large degree of discretionary exercise, which requires that follow-up and finances are closely linked. The frontline workers have been delegated this authority on the condition that they possess the competence required to exercise discretion, traditionally as trained social workers. This competence is particularly relevant in relation to municipal social assistance because the benefit is needs-tested and highly discretionary, in contrast to the state benefits, which are largely rule-based. Although social assistance is anchored in the Social Services Act and formally falls under the municipality, the NAV structure means that state authorities are present in the municipality (Erlien, 2017, p. 216).

We address the following question: *What unfolds in the meeting between frontline workers in NAV and young people with complex support needs (NEETs) who receive social assistance, and what conditions may have an impact on the way this group is followed up?*

Empirical studies

NEETs in Norway appear more vulnerable than NEETs at the same age in other European countries. They have poorer mental health and strong risk factors in relation to psychosocial problems, as many of them had contact with the child welfare services, with the core of the problems being a lack of belonging in important relationships such as family or school (Fyhn et al., 2021, p. 7). They have poorer mental health and strong risk factors for psychosocial problems; many of them have had contact with child welfare services, as the core of the problems is a lack of belonging in important relationships and feelings of being an outsider, and loneliness (Fyhn et al., 2021, pp. 6-7).

Several studies have examined the practices of frontline workers (Lipsky, 2010; Zacka, 2017), focusing on the activation trend and its implementation (Caswell et al., 2017; Gjersøe & Leseth, 2022; Hagelund et al., 2016; Vilhena, 2020). Political motives and the management of social services are intertwined in new ways, which few scientific contributions take into consideration (Erlien, 2017, p. 209). As such, there are few studies of social assistance (Erlien, 2017), and how this service is performed by the frontline workers. Social assistance has not received the same attention as rights-based social security schemes, which to a greater extent are standardized and easier to compare (Erlien, 2017, p. 213), although the focus on state benefits can possibly be explained by the fact that social assistance should only be a short-term benefit (Heggebø et al., 2020, p. 68). A few studies have centred on social activation services (the 'Qualifications programme' in NAV) (Natland & Hansen, 2014; Ohls, 2020; Schaft & Spjelkavik, 2012). Providing social assistance is a balancing act between giving help and exercising control (Jærvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003; Kjørstad, 2006; Levin, 2004; Ylvisaker & Rugkåsa, 2021).

Bradshaw and Terum (1997) examined social assistance schemes in 24 countries by comparing four dimensions: Prominence, level of utility, institutional design and poverty reduction. They asked the question whether there exists a distinctly Nordic approach to the poor and marginalized based on social assistance schemes. They conclude that it is difficult to single out a specific Nordic approach (Bradshaw & Terum, 1997, p. 247), and that the same elements can be identified in other small countries, e.g., Austria, Switzerland and Luxembourg, where the level of the benefits are generous; nevertheless, the discretionary management can lead to different treatment of similar cases, and the needs test is very tough, as the work test and requirements to take treatment or rehabilitation (Bradshaw & Terum, 1997, p. 255).

Research on frontline work in NAV has suggested the development of a work-oriented frontline worker role at the local NAV offices (Terum & Jessen, 2015; Helgøy et al., 2013). The activation has two dimensions: work and management direction, and user and negotiation direction. The supervisors express that the interaction is practically never only user- and negotiation-oriented. The user and negotiation direction appears as an aspect of the work direction, or as a means of making the

work and management direction more efficient (Terum & Jessen, 2015, p. 107). User participation then becomes a method of increasing efficiency through responsibility and self-activity. At the same time, the supervisors were inclined to waive the principle of participation when the users showed little interest or ability to participate in the process (Djuve & Kavli, 2006, p. 216). It seems that a user orientation can be problematic to pursue within the given institutional framework, because the power relationship between service providers and service recipients is fundamentally asymmetrical. Frontline workers in NAV reason that based on 'soft paternalistic' and mutual justifications of conditionality in their assessments of activation measures and sanctions, both emphasize dialogue and relational work with users (Gjersøe, 2022, p. 430).

Exercise of discretion and organizational factors are interrelated, for instance, when it comes to setting activity requirements and imposing benefit sanctions. Organizational factors have an influence on frontline workers' use of sanctions, which leads to significant differences for the clients (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015, p. 31). Despite managerial control and bureaucratic procedures governing many decisions, discretion remains a hallmark of frontline work, but the discretionary power of trained social workers is challenged by the pressure for uniform practice and a management-regulated role (Jessen & Tufte, 2014, p. 269). In addition, there is the tension between the social work logic and the state bureaucratic activation logic in the NAV offices (Fossestøl et al., 2015, p. 292). Such conflicting logics of power are expressed in the search for user orientation within the given institutional framework (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 119).

Lipsky- street-level bureaucracy

According to Lipsky (2010), street-level bureaucrats are 'public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their work' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 3). The definition does not address nominal professional roles, but instead the characteristics of the work situations (Lipsky, 2010, p. 239). Street-level bureaucracy as public service is work of a certain kind, carried out under certain conditions: Bureaucrats at the street level meet clients face-to-face, and have discretion in the exercise of authority (Lipsky, 2010). Even if the exercise of discretion represents a room for

action, the exercise of discretion does not represent an absolute freedom, because it will always be framed by limitations set by authorities (Grimen & Molander, 2008, p. 181). In addition, they cannot do the job according to ideal perceptions of practice due to the constraints of the work structure (Lipsky, 2010, p. 17). Their practices are not always coherent with guidelines and political intentions, and therefore difficult to predict (Brodkin, 2013; Lipsky, 2010; Senghaas et al., 2019). It is well known that frontline workers vary in the extent to which they carry out higher-level policies (Brodkin, 2013; Lipsky, 2010; May &Winter, 2009). Such 'deviant' practice is often attributed to frontline workers 'ability to exercise discretion (Evans, 2010; Freidson, 1994; Lipsky, 1980). However, frontline workers must be able to reason their way to a conclusion about what should be done in a certain case (Davis, 1969; Dworkin, 1977; Barak, 1989).

Lipsky's theoretical perspective provides an opportunity to examine how frontline workers adapt political and organizational settings to their professional practice. Lipsky (2010) describes such adaptations as strategies the street-level bureaucrats employ to reduce the contradictions in their work (Brodkin, 2013; Chang, 2022; Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky's approach stresses the balance between control and autonomy in public service work (Evans, 2010, p. 12). This tension between the requirement to follow organizational guidelines, and at the same time responding to individual needs and requirements, is at the heart of Lipsky's analysis of discretion (Evans, 2010, p. 14). Lipsky has been criticized for not paying sufficient attention to the intersection of professionalism and leadership, and for not considering the particular impact of professional status and obligations on the scope and operation of discretion (Evans, 2011, p. 371).

Social work: Concepts and perspectives

Social work is aimed at promoting social change and development, in addition to empowerment at the individual level (Stepney, 2022, pp.10-11). What should be the focus of change – the individual or the environment – lies in the discipline's unit of analysis – the person in the situation – or the individual/groups in their context (Levin, 2004, pp. 64-65). The concept describes the relationship between 'man and his environment' (Richmond, 1922; Cornell, 2006), and fundamental to this concept are

the notions that people and their environment are in constant change, and that this change occurs in close interaction between the individual and their social environment (Mead, 1934; Richmond, 1922). Such a view emphasizes the interactive and dynamic part of human life, as well as how people develop through social processes (Mead, 1934; Richmond, 1922).

The person in this situation illustrates that social work has a double obligation: to society and to the welfare of the individual (Kleppe, 2015; Kleppe et al., 2019). This duality requires both a broader contextual understanding and specialist knowledge (Stephney, 2022, p. 10). Such a view emphasizes the interactive and dynamic part of human life, as well as how people develop through social processes (Mead, 1934; Richmond, 1922). This understanding will have an impact on how the frontline workers meet and work with users. The person in this situation requires social case management, where movement and change between the individual and his environment is emphasized (Richmond, 1922, p. 129). The person in this situation makes it possible to see a connection between the frontline workers' practices and the nature of social problems.

Institutional theory

The German sociologist Max Weber is considered one of the early proponents of institutional theory. His work on rational decision-making, science-based values and rational ways of organizing has significantly influenced the field (Wendt, 2017, p. 1). The theory was further developed in the United States by several sociologists, including Philip Selznick. Selznick contributed classic insights to organizational and institutional theory, examining the inherent organizational tendencies that can undermine even the highest ideals, unless consciously countered and mastered (Krygier, 2012, p. 2).

New institutional organizational theory emphasizes the importance of culture and socially constructed norms for the functioning of organizations. The theory is particularly relevant in studies of organizations that deliver products and services where it is challenging to measure and quantify, usually in the public sector (Mik-Meyer & Villardsen, 2012, p. 87). Institutional logics refer to socially constructed,

historical practice patterns, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules that give meaning to activities in a field (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 101). The institutional theory brings out the institutional logic through frontline workers' interpretations of contextual conditions. With the help of the theory, it is shown how welfare organizations in practice balance institutional paradoxes (for example, punishing and providing care at the same time). The ability to navigate or balance is only possible to the extent that organizational functions can be separated and reorganized according to a specific division of labour in the organization (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Goodrick & Reay, 2011).

Methodological approach

To help shed light on the research question, observations and focus group interviews have been conducted. The first author carried out 14 participatory observations of conversations between the frontline workers and NEETs (in this case young social assistance recipients) and five focus group interviews in the five offices with the respective frontline workers. We have chosen the term *young people* in the further description, instead of NEETs. In this way, we want to make the further presentation more authentic and less alienating. The term frontline workers has been chosen because it both links to central theory (Lipsky, 2010) and because other terms such as supervisors are quite 'general' so that the special context in which this work takes place does not become clear.

The offices

The offices were selected based on their geographical location and size: The five offices are responsible for between 30,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. In the Norwegian context, the offices can thus be categorized as medium-sized and large offices, and they are geographically spread over the southern part of the country. The purpose of this was to capture possible variation in the offices' organizational structure and the practices of frontline workers. We thought it might be useful to have such a breadth to see if size and geographical location could have an impact on the way the work is organized, also particularly in relation to the municipal side of NAV having greater opportunity for local adaptations of the service.

The frontline workers

The criterion for participation by NAV frontline workers was that they work with young people seeking or receiving financial social assistance. The NAV supervisors were both women and men between their mid-20s and 60s. Their educational background varied, and there were social workers, welfare workers and teachers among the informants. We wanted to get as close as possible to 'a normal day at NAV'. We understand a 'normal day' as frontline workers' daily practice, where they do not have extra resources available such as, e.g., in projects. The purpose of this was to explore what kind of services young people receiving social assistance are usually offered – apart from projects.

Observations and focus group interviews

Research ethics guidelines (The national research ethics guidelines, 2021) and reflections apply to all aspects of the project, while at the same time safeguarding young people appears to be particularly central. Even though the young people themselves have agreed in writing to participate in the project, they have been recruited by the frontline workers who can raise problems in relation to voluntariness. On the other hand, it was the most natural procedure, as it had become challenging to recruit the young people in another way.

The observations are inspired by the ethnographic perspective where the researcher participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives - for a longer period of time, to see what happens, listen to what is said and asks questions; in fact, everyone collects data which is available to shed light on the research question (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 2). Our role can be described as a present observer, which means that the researcher participates to a small extent in the ordinary interaction between the participants in the field being studied (Johannessen et al., 2009, p. 127). Despite our desire to influence the interaction between young people and the frontline workers to the least possible extent, our presence has an impact on the situation. According to this, the method can be criticized based on this fact, but at the same time it was not possible to obtain relevant data in another way to shed light on our question (Johannessen et al., 2009, p. 199). The observations provided the opportunity to study the immediate interaction between the frontline workers and the

young people to a greater extent, as opposed to pre-structured data based on ready-made questions in a questionnaire (Johannessen et al., 2009, p. 119). The frontline workers and the young people could discuss the topics they wanted, in the order they wanted, without interpreting the situation in advance (Tjora, 2010, p. 62). We were aware that our research is concerned with a vulnerable group. We asked ourselves how our presence could possibly affect the process. To take up as little 'space' as possible, we chose not to take notes on a laptop, but rather to write on paper with a pencil. We found that this choice helped to make the observations more 'natural' because we could more easily follow the conversation and pick up the young people's non-verbal signals. Some of the young people expressed that they experienced our presence as positive, and asked if we would also like to be part of the next conversation.

The observations were followed up by focus group interviews with the respective frontline workers in each office. The hallmark of a focus group is the combination of group interaction and researcher-led subject focus, while the researcher has a withdrawn role (Halkier, 2010; Morgan, 1997). Focus groups are currently enjoying high popularity, as the method has traditionally been most used by market researchers, and to guide political campaign advertising and government image processing (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011, p. 2). Researchers have been using focus groups for decades over the last 80 years (Morgan, 1997; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Focus groups are ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns. The method is particularly useful for letting the participants formulate their own questions, frameworks, concepts and priorities on their own terms, and in their own vocabulary (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011, p. 6). According to Kitzinger and Barbrou (2011), focus groups are group discussions that explore a specific set of issues (p. 5), a form of a group interview (Halkier, 2010, p. 10). But focus groups differ from the broader category of group interviews by explicitly using group interaction to generate data (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011, p. 5). The method also has weaknesses, e.g., that the social control in the group can prevent different perspectives and experiences from emerging (Halkier, 2010, p. 14). The purpose of the focus groups interviews was precisely to give the frontline workers the opportunity to discuss with each other on their own terms, and to delve more deeply into themes we had become aware of during the observations.

The observations and focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in its entirety by the first author. The analysis of the empirical data was theme-based, and the empirical categories that had crystallized during the observations were used as indicative. The code-structured empirical data developed into further codes, which resulted in some main themes about the specialization of work tasks and how this can affect the frontline workers' work and the service provision. In combination, the observations and focus group interviews provided a rich and varied dataset, and they complemented each other. Using this method, we obtained information in the observations on what they actually do, and on how they reason and explain their actions, attitudes and behaviour in the focus groups (Ulvik et al., 2016, p. 229). Through the observations, we became aware of the specialization of frontline workers' tasks. In the analysis of the transcriptions, we looked for which topics the young people were concerned with, and which topics the frontline workers were concerned with. We found that the young people were often concerned with finances, while the frontline workers were often concerned with registrations to document activity. This insight resulted in themes and questions for the focus groups, where we wanted to explore how frontline workers experience specialization (Fangen, 2020; Halkier, 2010). In the analysis of the material from the focus groups, we were concerned with opinions despite- or in opposition in the group, and the consensus that was expressed (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011, p. 189).

Results – findings

When we investigated encounters between frontline workers on the municipal side of NAV and the young people, we were surprised that the municipal 'side' is organized quite similarly from municipality to municipality. This, even though the municipalities have the opportunity to organize the service adapted to local conditions and needs, was something we considered by having a certain geographical spread among the offices. The similarity was particularly evident in that four out of five offices had separate decisions on granting social assistance benefit (case management) from follow-up support. Several of the offices also had 'job specialists', and their task was to provide specialized follow-up in relation to labour market inclusion. Such an

organization means that up to three NAV employees can follow up a single young person. An image of the various roles and tasks is presented in Table 1:

Table 1

Designation	Work task	Frequency - the offices
Frontline worker	Follow-up **and** benefit decisions	One of five
Frontline worker follow-up	Follow-up, no case management finances	Four of five
Finance case manager*	Case management finances, **no face-to-face contact** with users	Two of five
Finance frontline case manager	Case management finances **with face-to-face** contact with users	Two of five
Job specialist	Follow-up in relation to work inclusion, no case management finances	Five of five

*Organized into decision-making teams

The following presentation of the results is laid out thematically across the NAV offices and collection method (observations and focus group interviews).

Specialized welfare services

In the following quotes from the focus group interviews, the frontline workers describe how the specialization of work tasks plays out in practice, and they were positive about the specialization as such:

> *So, someone has the follow-up of service users, and others have case management of finances. They're also here in this office, yes. We sort of specialize in the follow-up; others can deal with the case management of finances.* (Office B. Frontline worker follow-up)

> *You can get up to three people involved – one working with finances, one working with follow-up and one who's a Job specialist.* (Office D. Frontline worker follow-up)

The Act on Social Services in NAV provides considerable scope for discretionary use. Such an exercise of discretion presupposes insight into the individual's social situation at the same time as it requires a good knowledge of the opportunities and obligations contained in the law. If up to three NAV employees are following up on a person, there may be a danger that the frontline workers lose the overview, and that connections are lost.

'It's easier to focus on something other than money'

The following quotes show that the frontline workers not only welcomed the specialization, but they also experienced it as a relief. They hoped that in this way they could save time, so that they had the opportunity to talk about topics other than money, e.g., work and the way forward. The talk of finances seems to be disturbing, which may indicate that they see the role of frontline worker of follow-up and financial case management as fundamentally different, and at odds with each other.

> *It's easier to focus on something other than money, such as employment and the future. Otherwise, all we talk about is money.* (Office E. Frontline worker follow-up)

> *As an employment specialist, the idea is that we shouldn't spend time on that (economy) because it takes so much of the focus.* (Office A. Job specialist)

> *We can now have a proper focus on the conversations that is not always about money, so I can say: We'll now look at employment and the way forward, you can discuss the finances with this or that frontline worker for economy.* (Office C. Frontline worker follow-up)

The quotes illustrate NAV's contradictory objectives, where work and work inclusion are central goals, while the young people's finances must be kept 'outside' so that the process is not disturbed. It appears that the institutional logic in this way influences the practice of frontline workers, while the natural connection between work and income seems to be overlooked.

Knowledge gaps

The following quotes from the focus group interviews at three different NAV offices illustrate that the specialized way of working seems to affect the frontline workers' knowledge, something they are aware of:

> *Think we lose, or don't gain knowledge about the relevant areas that the others are working on. I work in finance, but know nothing about the action plan portfolio here* at *NAV.* (Office D. Finance frontline case manager)

> *I've thought that the finance case manager knows best – know the regulations better than I do.* (Office B. Frontline worker follow-up)

> *I worked at another NAV office before. There it was clear – only a few worked with finances and decision-making. I therefore had no experience of economic management, no idea about that.* (Office C. Frontline worker)

The quotes illustrate that the follow-up of the young people can be fragmented, because the frontline workers do not have enough knowledge of key areas in the

follow-up work. This way of organizing work tasks takes little account of the overall situation, and the close follow-up the young people need.

'Individual plan- I have not heard of that'

When asked how the frontline workers use so-called 'individual plans', which is a law-based coordination tool (across services) in the Social Services Act in NAV section 28, the informants answered as follows:

> *Do you mean the activity plan in NAV? Individual plan - I have not heard of that.* (Office C. Frontline worker 3. follow-up)

> *I didn't know what it was, until you asked.* (Office C. Frontline worker 1. follow-up)

> *I believe that there may be uncertainty around the* individual plans*. How are we going to do it? I have worked somewhere else before - we worked a lot with it then. Never in NAV. I needed an increase in competence around that - who and how. I sit and think that many of mine should have an individual plan. But I'm not sure what will go into it...which agencies...* (Office C. Frontline worker 2. follow-up)

Little knowledge and insight into Individual Plans can be an expression that a holistic approach to the users' situation is not being considered, and possibly appears as too complex. The specialization is possibly an attempt to make complex problems manageable. On the other hand, when they were asked to tell a sunshine story the informants singled out a well-coordinated cooperation between different agencies and professional fields as a success factor:

> *A sunshine story - what does it take to succeed? Good cooperation and trust in the user. You can do this. It is the user who has done the work. We kept our promises. Good communication and cooperation between relevant units - everyone involved.* (Office B. Frontline worker follow-up)

'I lost everything: school and work- everything'

The next quotes from conversations between young people and frontline workers illustrate that the young people face stressful and unpredictable life situations. They also show that the work focus can stand in the way of 'seeing' connections:

> *I have good experience as a waiter and from a shop, but you know I had a bad situation in my family. Then I lost everything: school and work - everything.* (Young person office A)

Note: Frontline worker looks at the laptop, try to find the correct category in the digital system/digital activity plan for 'ticks' that reflect the category the young person is assigned to:

> *Then I think we can take it here (category in the system/tick/laptop) because right now you are without a job or school place.* (Frontline worker office A)

The frontline worker did not ask follow-up questions to explore the young person's situation, but continue to carry out the digital registrations. The nature of social problems stands in opposition to such a practice, where the registration in the activity plan appears to be the most central, and this can also lead to the procedural side of the collaboration being challenged.

I haven't heard anything'

The next quote illustrates, that it can be difficult for the young people to 'manoeuvre' between the specialized services NAV offers:

> *I have a question about something else. I've spoken to xxx about getting a work placement. I want to know what's happening. When will I get a work placement? I haven't heard anything.* (Young person office D)
>
> *I'm dealing with finances, and I haven't heard anything about it. But I can ask xxx and let you know.* (Finance frontline case manager office D)
>
> *I want a work placement in (industry) nothing else. I've worked in this in my homeland.* (Young person office D)
>
> *I'll let the job specialist know* (Finance frontline case manager office D)
>
> *Yes, let them know that I want a work placement so that I can get experience and learn the language. I worked in (industry) for a long time in my homeland.* (Young person office D)

This young person wants to talk about work, but the frontline worker focuses on their area of responsibility - economy. In this way, the specialization appears to be able to influence one of NAV's main goals – that more people proceed from public benefits to income-generating work. In this way, the quote illustrates the paradox - that work and finance have been 'divided' into different areas of responsibility in NAV.

'My role - I get pulled in different directions. But they don't understand that... '

The following quotes from the focus group interviews illustrate some of frontline work's typical dilemmas: both standing between help and control, and institutional limitations that often do not allow assisting the young people with comprehensive social problems. They did not give the impression that they considered it problematic that 'others' were now making decisions regarding finances. They hoped that the

specialization would lead to less conflict, because they considered responsibility, and the possible rejection of financial demands, as opposed to relationship building:

> *Because the service users focus on finances. They want more, but they can't get more. I notice that some of them distrust me after that. Thinking that I don't want to help them. It's not that I don't want to give them these things. When I must adhere to limits, and at the same time be the relationship builder – yes, when I must adhere to limits – or inform them about it. My role - I get pulled in different directions. But they don't understand that.* (Office E. Frontline worker follow-up)

> *I'm happy not to be involved in the finance case management for reasons of capacity. But also, because I can say that another department has decided this, even if I'm conveying the message. Then I can offer guidance, for instance, about appeals,etc. We're perhaps more on their (users) side. When we've talked about the service user's whole life, and then they get a rejection from me – that was even worse.*
> (Office D. Frontline worker – follow-up)

> *...in a way, a relief – when someone is misguided and arguing about the performance, one can refer to regulations and the finance case manager.* (Office B. Frontline worker follow-up)

Specialization can create new conflict zones

Although the frontline workers hoped to avoid conflict when the youth's finances are now organized in separate teams, the specialization may lead to new problems; there may be conflicting views between the frontline worker follow-up and the person responsible for the young people's finances. Individually adapted performance conditions depend on good insight into the users' situation, requiring close contact. When promises are not kept, it affects the relationship between the frontline workers and the young people:

> *... someone who has been a NAV client for a long time – on and off social assistance. I've followed the person for several years. A lot of aggression, yelling. Then I managed to put something in place, but the client didn't get the money I had promised within the given time. Yeah, that's how it is with the decision-making teams...* (Office B. Frontline worker follow-up)

> *I have 'argued' with the finance case manager when they will not grant what I think is important to the process.* (Office B. Frontline worker follow-up)

The quotes illustrate that the specialization could cause less predictability. The 'allocation of discretion can create unclear responsibilities, and the specialization can lead to extra work for the frontline workers when they have to go 'extra rounds' so that decisions about the users' finances are in line with the follow-up work.

Money talk during activation guidance

In the focus group interviews, the frontline workers emphasized the importance of 'talking about something other than money, but despite this, economics was sometimes a natural part of the conversation and a 'gateway' to other central themes:

> *You're good with money.* (Frontline worker follow-up office C)
>
> *I learned that from my mum.* (Young person office D)
>
> *That's good, it's not easy. There are various disbursements, employment scheme benefits and housing allowance and supplementary benefit. So, it's not easy to stay on top of your finances.* (Frontline worker follow-up office D)
>
> *I take my finances very seriously.* (Young person office D)
>
> *It's important. Things can get tough when the situation is complicated. Lots to worry about.* (Frontline worker follow-up office D)
>
> *It reminds me of when we were little, Mum was right that having little money is difficult, especially when you have children. When I was young- my parents had less so I shouldn't complain. If I get a good job, I think I would still save.* (Young person office D)

The conversation about finances opens for recognition and mastery, and that the youth's life story can influence their strategies for dealing with financial problems. In the next example, the frontline worker reveals that the young person has not been given either a bed or the opportunity to wash clothes. The young person is not aware of which support schemes can be applied for, and the frontline worker complies with the requirement to assist:

> *Otherwise, how are you now?* (Frontline worker follow-up office B)
>
> *I am feeling ok. But I am struggling with poor sleep. The apartment I got is unfurnished without a washing machine, and there is no sofa or kitchen equipment.* (Young person office B)
>
> *What do you have in the apartment now?* (Frontline worker follow-up office B)
> *I have a mattress and a blanket.* (Young person office B)
>
> *You did not apply for support for furniture?* (Frontline worker follow-up office B)
>
> *No* (Young person office B)

Taking the young people's 'here and now' situation seriously proved to open up dialogue, while at the same time giving a more holistic picture of the young people's situation - a practice that is in line with the intention and purpose of the Act on Social Services in NAV. Hence, in the focus group interviews, the frontline workers were keen to separate finances from other topics ;to be able to talk about something else

than money', but in the face-to-face meetings with the users, they choose a different path.

Discussion

Specialized welfare services

In this article, we have presented findings on what takes place in meetings between young people with complex support needs (NEETs) who receive social assistance and frontline workers in NAV. We argue that the organizational 'move' to separate the traditional case management of benefit decisions from the follow-up work can challenge the character and quality of social services. When these young people contact NAV, they need help with finances and work - in that order (Strand et al., 2020, p. 103). Our results show that young people often want to talk about finances, while the frontline workers would rather talk about 'something other than money'. The understanding that finances can be separated from other topics does not consider that money problems become a dominant factor, and that people who have financial problems will spend all their energy and effort on this, at the expense of other matters (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013, p. 132).

It seems that the aim of the specialization is to put the work-oriented aspect in the foreground by placing finance 'somewhere else'. The work orientation can also result in the young people being followed up by a job specialist so that they can end up with three NAV employees who, respectively, are responsible for finances, work inclusion and follow-up. These young people are often in challenging situations characterized by complex problems, such as little predictability, poor finances, unsuitable housing, a limited social network and an unclear health situation. There is a risk that they will not be followed up in the holistic way their situation and needs require (Richmond, 1922; Cornell, 2006). Our understanding of *close follow-up* is rooted in social work's overall perspective, which means that people cannot be understood if they are not seen in the light of the whole, i.e., the social context of which they are a part of (Bernler & Johnsson, 2001, 58). The results show that NAV is organized in a specialized way, so that acting from an overall perspective will in practice be distributed among several 'hands', and there is a risk that the follow-up of these young people will not meet their complex needs.

Institutional boundaries

The purpose of the Social Services Act is extensive in that it '... shall improve the living conditions for the disadvantaged, contribute to social and economic security, including that the individual is given the opportunity to live independently, dwell independently and promote the transition to work, social inclusion and active participation in society' (Social Services Act, 2009, Act 1). The specialization on the municipal side in NAV appears as an institutional boundary when the frontline workers' follow-up is 'disconnected' from finance casework, at the same time as responsibility for work inclusion lies with the job specialist. The specialization reflects the prevailing institutional logic or pronounced work orientation in NAV (Alm Andreassen & Aasen, 2015; Strand et al., 2020; Stjernø & Hatland, 2020), which in turn influences the practices of frontline workers (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Goodrick & Reay, 2011). The results show that the young people's financial situation is not being considered to a sufficient extent, and that the topic - finances - is considered to have a 'disruptive' impact on the cooperation between the frontline workers and the young people. It may appear that this way of organizing work does not consider the dynamics and characteristics of social problems linked to individual situations and circumstances (Strand et al., 2015, p. 39). The results also illustrate Lipsky's (2010, p. 15) point that even if the bureaucrats at the street level adapt political priorities and preferences according to the demands of the situation, the nature and assumptions of the meetings will also be significantly influenced by institutional boundaries (Brodkin, 2013, p. 23).

Lack of a holistic approach

The welfare state's transformation results in a 'paradigm shift' in the welfare state's objectives: From income protection to labour market integration (Van Berkel & Borghi, 2008, p. 333). This change can lead to users' finances being 'relevant' only when it can provide the opportunity to set conditions for activity (Act on Social Services in NAV, 2010, § 20). The division of follow-up and case management of finances is also deviant in relation to the Act on Social Services in NAV (2010), where follow-up and economics are closely linked. Financial social assistance is a needs-tested benefit that requires insight into complex life situations and knowledge of how

certain areas in the users' lives mutually affect each other. The law indicates that users must receive information, advice and guidance that can help solve or prevent social problem. The findings show that it is not so easy to achieve such connections when central tasks are separated from each other.

The frontline workers' practice largely follows the 'recipe' for follow-up with, for example, a focus on the activity plan. They made little use of the opportunity to exercise discretion in the way they followed up on the young people. The 'separation' of decision-making authority for finance and follow-up may possibly contribute to frontline workers being less aware of this possibility, which the Social Services Act allows for. Even if the exercise of discretion represents a room for action, it is not an absolute freedom because it will always be framed by limitations set by authorities or organizations (Lipsky, 2010; Grimen, 2008). The exercising of discretion is crucial to the provision of holistic individual assistance (Lipsky, 2010, p. 15). If key themes such as financial difficulties are no longer the topic of the follow-up between the young people and frontline workers, the relationship can lose content and purpose. Moreover, in the face-to-face meetings with the clients, the frontline workers encounter limitations that such formalizations imply, even though the specialization can simplify the work. They stand in the tension between client-centred goals and organizational goals, which they have to find a way to resolve. This distinction illustrates the classic dilemmas of street-level bureaucrats: their desire to offer individually adapted services and, on the other hand, the organization's requirements for efficiency within given resources (Lipsky, 2010, p. 44).

Knowledge and specialization

The specialization means that it can be harder for the frontline workers to see their work as a whole (Lipsky, 2010, p. 147). However, when users with extensive and complex needs must relate to several frontline workers, there is also a risk that no one 'sees' the whole or takes responsibility for it (Kleppe, 2015, p. 9). However, the results show that they also 'take back' this opportunity in the face of adversity (Brodkin, 2011; Evans, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). When the frontline workers still address financial questions, it is a response to the fact that complex phenomena cannot be simplified and broken down.

These young people come to NAV because they need help with social and economic problems, and the frontline workers need analytical skills and knowledge from various sources and disciplines (Kleppe, 2019, p. 146). The search for such knowledge covers both personal and social problems, and regards various aspects of the clients' situation and needs as mutually dependent on each other (Cornell, 2006; Richmond, 1922). In a holistic approach, mapping, follow-up and decision-making should go hand in hand. Specialization can cause the frontline workers to miss the complexity of the problems and the opportunity to 'meet the client where they are', which requires knowledge of 'Person In situation' - a holistic 'look' on individuals' aid and social conditions (Cornell, 2006, p. 50). It is not possible to have a complete overview of all elements that impact on a situation, but the search for an overall perspective will help to identify opportunities, barriers and the potential in the individual (Berg et al., 2019, p. 26).

'Deviating' practice

In the focus group interviews, the informants' supported the specialization, but the observations showed a more varied practice. In their encounters with the young people, finances were sometimes an integral part of the conversation. In this way, their use of discretion is to overcome the requirement to follow organizational guidelines, while at the same time responding to individual needs (Evans, 2010, p. 14). The search for user orientation also illustrates tensions between institutional frameworks and conflicting logics of power (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 119). A user-orientation can be problematic to pursue within the given institutional framework, because the power relationship between service providers and service recipients is fundamentally asymmetrical.

Specialization - whose needs are met?

Specialization can have a negative impact on practice, even if it were to support the organization's goals, as in practice it may be at odds with the goals themselves (Lipsky, 2010, p. 85). But such organizational changes may also be intended to meet the needs of frontline workers, such as saving time and avoiding conflict. Activation is often provided by workers who do not have a clear professional profile, and they are

often recruited from several professions (Caswell et al., 2017, p. 6). This educational diversity may show that the local welfare agency's managers are still in the process of discovering what educational profile fits the job requirements of frontline workers involving activation (Van Berkel, 2017, p. 151). In this way, this specialization can be an attempt to 'match' complex work tasks and situations with competence profiles that 'hit' some of the areas. On the other hand, different professional approaches can possibly contribute to solving so-called 'wicked problems', which refer to socially complex, unstructured, unstable, transversal problems that have several causes, but no clear solution (Fehrer et al., 2022, p. 614).

Conclusion and implications for frontline social work

The results show an increased specialization of tasks on the municipal side of NAV. The service was, to a greater or lesser extent, specialized despite the offices being located in different municipalities. This is the case, even though the municipalities are free to adapt this municipal service to local conditions and needs. Specializations in practice mean 'dividing up' central themes in the young people's situation, and there is a danger that connections, both in mapping and follow-up, will disappear. Among other things, the specialization leads to the young people's questions about finances not being followed up or referred to others. The attempts to manage the frontline workers' discretion seem to have changed frontline practice (Caswell et al., 2017, p. 170). The results illustrate Lipsky's (2010) central point about the tension between the requirement to follow organizational guidelines, and to be responsive to individual demands. The results also show the frontline workers' responsiveness to the young people's situation, and how they try to adapt the service to the young people's needs, which shows how frontline workers not only implement social policy - they also create it.

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