

Editorial

Work inclusion as part of social work

by

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Social work has traditionally focused on supporting individuals and communities in challenging situations to enhance their well-being. Over the years, a strong policy orientation towards active labour market policies has influenced Western societies and beyond, emphasising the importance of labour market inclusion (van Berkel, Caswell, Kupka, & Larsen, 2017). This shift has significantly impacted the field of social work (Caswell, Eskelinen, & Olesen, 2013; Dall, 2020).

With active labour market policy comes conditionality. This can take multiple forms, one being mandatory participation in specific programmes/activities for benefit recipients. In the international research literature, some argue that social work is incompatible to this element of employment services (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012). However, within the frames of public services, social work has always had an inherent tension of providing both help and control.

Several arguments support the relevance of social work professionals in the delivery of active labour market policies (Caswell, 2020). In Scandinavian countries, social work has played a central role in the allocation of social assistance cash transfers, with many staff members being trained social workers (Bradshaw & Terum, 1997). Moreover, social assistance has become increasingly intertwined with public employment services (Minas, 2014). This integration is driven by the idea that employment services should cater to a broader range of users, including those facing complex challenges and barriers to employment.

Hence, one key argument is the client group. Over time, the population within the policy realm of active labour market policies (ALMP) has expanded to include more individuals with multiple and diverse challenges beyond unemployment (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). Consequently, employment services and work inclusion as a professional field are highly relevant for social work and social work research. The social work profession is particularly important in providing work inclusion services because central aspects of employment policies and services target people in vulnerable life situations, such as those struggling with impaired health or functionality, substance abuse, low levels of education and language barriers.

In this special issue, we focus on work inclusion as part of social work. We turn towards different perspectives relevant to this.

One perspective is the human need to belong and be included. This can pose a challenge for marginalised citizens who often find themselves at the outskirts of communities. In this perspective, being supported in the process of finding a way towards some level of work inclusion is attractive to many unemployed citizens, despite the challenges this process will often contain. It poses a challenge not only to the unemployed themselves, but also to arenas of inclusion (such as the workplace), and to the professional practice of social work (Gjersøe & Strand, 2023; Nielsen, Dall, & Madsen, 2023). The labour market is a central community in Western societies. For most people, the idea of contributing and participating in society is tightly connected to being active in the labour market. As such, workplace inclusion plays an increasingly central role in public employment services across national contexts (van Berkel, 2021). The field has seen a rise in approaches promoting supported employment and IPS (individual placement and support) as a method to include people with mental illness or developmental disabilities in the labour market (Frøyland, Andreassen, & Innvær, 2019). This, and similar developments, have placed workplaces increasingly at centre stage as actors in this policy area. In this special issue, several critical questions are raised concerning this development. How do we define work? And what about activities that take place on the outskirts of the traditional labour market? How do we develop services that are oriented toward the inclusion of marginalised people in broader communities, rather than a narrow focus on traditional labour market participation to accommodate the diverse and severe challenges of the client group?

Another perspective on work inclusion is the role of the professionals working at the frontline of this policy area. It is well documented that working at the frontline of employment services is demanding and filled with dilemmas. Zacka (2017) argues that frontline workers need to balance competing moral orientations of being efficient, being fair, being responsive and being respectful. All of them are necessary, but often contradictory. He points towards three pathologies that can occur if professionals are unable to work in a balanced way. As a coping mechanism, a professional can divert into being indifferent or taking the position as enforcer. Such

moral dispositions can lead to risks, where indifference may result in neglecting the needs and rights of clients, while an enforcer mentality can foster an overly punitive approach, undermining trust and the therapeutic relationship essential for social work. Another coping mechanism is adopting the role of a caregiver to protect vulnerable citizens from the demands of policies (Zacka, 2017). Excessive caregiving may need to be addressed because it can lead to paternalism, and an unreasonable unequal treatment or retention effects for citizens.

Coping mechanisms can be combined, such as caregiving and enforcing, resulting in a maternalistic approach at the frontline of employment services (Gjersøe & Leseth, 2020). This approach emphasises the interpersonal relationship between social workers and clients, where social workers use their professionalism to emphasise care and support embedded in activity rules. The form and content of social work are framed by public policy and the institution where they are employed as frontline workers. However, as professionals with ethical guidelines, they need to develop a critical voice to address how users can be suppressed by the system.

Although one might argue that there is hardly too much care and individual concern in public employment services, all of Zacka's pathologies represent potential challenges for social work professionals.

Public Employment Services increasingly require sufficient resources to meet the needs of individuals in diverse and vulnerable life situations with complex barriers to labour market participation. This may necessitate lower caseloads and the provision of services at a local or decentralised level. Working conditions are crucial in multiple aspects. Establishing relationships with individuals and addressing social problems holistically require an organisation of public employment services and other institutions, where social workers enact active labour market policies, in which reflection in action is a natural aspect of daily work (Caswell & Dall, 2022). Time and space for reflection in action are necessary conditions for a professional social work that is both 'structurally aware' and 'individually oriented'. In the field of active labour market policy, this means acknowledging the dark sides of a strong political emphasis on waged labour, while simultaneously supporting individuals to enter the labour market.

The seven articles in this special issue explore diverse facets of social work and public employment services, shedding light on the intricate challenges in supporting vulnerable populations. Each article provides critical insights into the complexities of policy implementation, the dynamics of frontline service delivery and the lived experiences of service users.

The article, *The user's perspective: Rethinking the concept of work in the context of the Norwegian welfare state* by Aud Kirsten A. Innjord explores work inclusion from the perspective of young adults outside the labour market due to health issues. It advocates for an expanded definition of work that includes activities contributing social value beyond paid employment. The study reveals that participation in work inclusion programmes is demanding and often exhausting, despite societal perceptions of passivity. It highlights a disconnect between welfare-to-work policies and the actual experiences of users, emphasising the need for policies that recognise the diverse forms of work individuals engage in a daily basis.

In *'I feel good here': A qualitative study on subsidised employment in a Swedish municipal labour market programme* Ellen Parsland and Gabriella Scaramuzzino examine how subsidised employees perceive themselves individually and as a group. The study reveals that users view social assistance as mandatory, while subsidised employment offers a sense of self-support and job identity. Social workers often see these users as not ready for regular employment, thereby potentially causing a lock-in effect by not encouraging job applications. The article suggests that social workers need to reflect on their perceptions to avoid creating a 'them' and 'us' division. It emphasises the importance of focusing on the labour market, rather than just marginalised individuals to prevent lock-in effects.

The article, *Iterations of work inclusion beyond standard service: Personalised welfare services in the era of activation and innovation*, by Kjetil G. Lundberg, Suzan M. Skjold, Arnhild Melve and Astrid O. Sundsbø examines the evolution of personalised welfare services in Norway. The study highlights the potential of these programmes to address gaps in traditional services, although it also notes challenges such as the risk of prioritising the most employable individuals. The authors argue

that the promise of personalisation should be evaluated considering the organisational setup of employment services, and how conditionality and voluntariness intersect to enable or constrain action.

Work Hazards and Social Class among 'successful' ALMP-Participants in Norway by Espen Dahl, Kjetil A. van der Wel, Åsmund Hermansen and Magne Bråthen argues that the notion of 'work promotes health' overlooks the risks faced by unskilled blue-collar workers, and emphasises the need for a better matching of individuals' resources with job demands to improve their employment prospects and working conditions.

The 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 examines the complexities and dilemmas faced by professionals, particularly social workers, in Danish public employment services. The study reveals that professional reflections are often more instrumental than critical, focusing on certainty and action rather than understanding dilemmas. The article argues that this is due to the 'logic of production' in employment services. It identifies four domains of reasoning—legislation, the system, health professionals and what-works research—and explores how more critical reflections can occur. The findings highlight the need for reflective practices that are both necessary and possible, even in the context of employment services, to develop more reflective organisations.

The article, *Is it all about the money? - a study of specialized frontline work in the Norwegian social assistance service* by Michaela Nilsen, Heidi Moen Gjersøe and Lise Kleppe examines interactions between NAV frontline workers and young individuals with complex support needs. The analysis examines how the specialisation of work tasks aims to prioritise work-oriented aspects of service provision, and distinguishes them from traditional casework focused on benefit decisions. However, the specialisation of tasks leads to a fragmented follow-up, with young people dealing with multiple workers. This fragmentation impacts service quality by not fully addressing the nature of social problems.

In *Between governance and local knowledge: Social workers' engagement with employment support for young people in the Faroe Islands and Greenland* by Anne Birgitte Leseth and Firouz Gaini the role of local knowledge and community in work inclusion initiatives is scrutinized. Data stem from interviews and ethnographic fieldwork on work inclusion in Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the Nordic countries. The authors argue that social work plays a critical role in providing culturally sensitive care and empowering indigenous communities. Also, more ethnographic/anthropological research on work inclusion as a form of togetherness and sociality is called for. As a conclusion, sustainable solutions to inclusion of young unemployed must be sought beyond work.

The articles in this special issue contribute to social work research underneath the canopy of active labour market policy, which over the years has become an important arena for social work practice. We hope you, dear reader, will find these contributions useful.

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