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Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The study focus on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management. Leaders and employees in NAV have to combine competencies, practices and values, and, at the same time, focus on both professional interests and organisational goals. The study found (a) contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors, (b) communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV, and (c) that leaders use DPM to control employees. The aspects (a) to (c) show a specific worldview in NAV. The study show a reciprocity, which means that leaders and counsellors need mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other's responsibilities and duties. It is fruitful to describe this situation in the public sector through the concept of symbolic rationality.

Key words

Leadership, counsellorship, symbolic rationality, public sector.

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Introduction

Leadership research has focused, during different periods, on leaders' traits, behaviours and the situations in which leadership is exercised. Theories of leadership are today often hybrids of traits, behaviours and contexts (Yukl, 2010). This perspective also involves a hybrid professionalism of leaders, which "combines professional and organisational logics in mixed structures, mixed forms of coordination (by multiple governance mechanisms), mixed management and mixed professionalism" (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018, p. 30). Yukl (2010, p. 26) defines leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives". Working as a leader in the public sector in this context is subject to a number of challenges (Wallo, et.al. 2013). On the one hand, increasing digitalisation of the public sector with electronic processing gives the leader the opportunity to monitor employees (Power, 1999; Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). On the other hand, the employee's integrity and rights are important areas which the leader must safeguard. At the same time, the leader must be the official who fulfils the social tasks of the business based on the Social Services Act, and the facilitator who helps employees guide clients to overcome their life difficulties. The leader must also address the conflict that can arise between the employee's work ethos, which means a strong will to help and do well for the user, and the organisation's financial and administrative requirements, which means complying with the budget and with laws (Lundquist, 1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008).

The category of employee has different meanings depending on the context it is used in. Unclear conceptualisation of how certain job characteristics, such as job meaningfulness, role-making processes and workload control, affect the reciprocal relations between leaders and employees. Leaders and employees drive one another and develop together in a work environment characterised by high acceptance of different opinions, which can be creative

forces when people have autonomy in their work situation (Smith et.al. 2008). Good collaboration involves both leaders and employees taking personal responsibility for their work and the working environment (Arfaeya, 2008). When leaders and employees collaborate, a smooth and innovative work environment is created where people dare to experiment and fail. The support of leaders, autonomy, cooperation and the internal climate are factors that influence an employee's ability to fulfil job demands (Smith et.al, 2008).

The aim of this article is to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). We focus on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management. The article presents the concept of symbolic rationality in an attempt to characterise relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV. In the article, we try to answer the following research question: How are relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV affected by demands in the intersection between economic, administrative and client-oriented work tasks?

Theory

Transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX)

Transformational leadership is a values-based style of leadership that distinguishes between transaction and transformation (Burns, 1978; Yukl, 2010). This perspective differs from a simplified causal and transactional understanding of leadership where desirable behaviour is rewarded and undesirable behaviour is punished (Burns, 1978). Transactional leadership involves an almost ideal mathematical causal understanding of cause and effect in the leadership context (O`Neill, 1989). Transformational leadership emphasises inspiring employees to do their best by developing a vision, using symbols and setting a good example (Goodsell, 1977; Yukl, 2010). Leaders involve their employees and follow them up in a personal manner that underpins their sense of meaning and mastery in relation to their job (Bass and Avolio, 1990a; Tummers & Knies, 2013). The use of transformational leadership

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today focuses on change and promotes values-based and relationship-based leadership, which can reverse and possibly prevent leadership failure due to pure economic leadership rationality (Van Wart, 2003; Kellis & Bing, 2015).

Leader-member exchange (LMX) is defined as a leadership practice linked to the meaningfulness of and commitment to the employees' work situation (Tummers & Knies, 2013). Research shows that LMX affects work meaningfulness, which, in turn, influences job outcomes such as lower turnover, higher job performance, higher job satisfaction and higher perceived procedural empowerment (Dulebohn et.al, 2012). LMX describes the role-making processes between a leader and each individual employee and the exchange relationship between them. The theory focuses on "reciprocal influence processes within vertical dyads composed of one person who has direct authority over another person" (Yukl, 2010, p. 235). Different leaders will get along differently with different employees, and LMX describes the quality of the relationship between a leader and an employee. The leader may have "favourites" and less favoured members of staff. In low-LMX relationships, there is mainly an economic exchange between leaders and employees, exemplified by employees investing their working time to get money in exchange. High-LMX relationships are, on one hand, characterised by mechanisms of reciprocity and social exchange which become effective through mutual trust and employees' sense of being valued by their leaders (Tummers & Knies, 2013). On the other hand, there is a concern that there will be less compliance if the leaders' "favourites" get more benefits than they deserve (Yukl, 2010).

Symbolism

A symbol can be seen as a part of the interpretive aspects that make up organisational culture (Hatch, 2018; Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). This is known as a form of symbolism in which organisational structures, professional roles and leadership, beyond purely functional meanings, say something about moral and values. Examples of situations, which are both

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practical and symbolic, can be dialogues between leaders and employees, organisational hierarchies and digitalisation of documentation procedures in the public sector. This article introduces the concept of symbolic rationality in the context of organisational analysis in the public sector. The concept was developed under a research programme on "Leadership and client orientation in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)". In the article, symbolic rationality is not discussed in relation to decision theory in particular, nor does it take a purely philosophical approach (Cabantous, et.al, 2010). Instead, we take an approach that involves endeavouring to understand how a category such as symbolic rationality can be assigned meanings and how these meanings can be used to describe relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV (Cf. Hacking, 1999).

Conceptual framings of rationality

Rational aspects of the NAV organisation can be studied from many different perspectives. One perspective is theoretical rationality, another is practical rationality, while a third is rationality in connection with decisions. From a philosophy of science perspective, a majority of scientists have discussed whether, and in what way, rationality has an ontological status as something that is fundamentally human. Others believe that rationality is shaped and constructed by different actors in different social situations (Audi, 2004). When rationality is discussed in a public welfare organisation such as NAV, it is largely linked to reason and what is not random (Weber, 2000). Weber (2000) distinguishes between two ideal types of rationality. Goal rationality is when a leader chooses the most expedient means of achieving the goal. Value rationality is how a certain way of acting has a clear intrinsic value that can be justified from an ethical, aesthetic or religious perspective (Weber, 2000). Simon distinguishes between subjectively and objectively rational decisions (Simon, 1976). Among other things, he discusses whether a leader is subjectively rational when they do what they believe is best, or whether the leader is objectively rational if the action is actually the best

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option. Our discussion of rationality in this article is directly linked to the use of Digital Production Management (DPM) in NAV and to the ambition of establishing metric knowledge, through measuring and counting, which can be used to plan and optimise the organisation in a rational manner. However, DPM does not only appear to have a measurement function. It is interesting that a rational, technical and instrumental tool like DPM can also be used to develop "smoother" dialogues between leaders and counsellors in NAV (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018; Schaefer & Lynch, 2015). A "smoother" dialogue means that leaders can use administrative statistics in their relational interaction with counsellors.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)

NAV consists of the former unemployment agency, social security agency and municipal social services in Norway. The municipalities and the state cooperate on finding solutions for clients through 456 NAV offices. NAV has around 19,000 employees, around 14,000 of whom are employed by the state, while around 5,000 are municipal employees. The agency manages one third of the Norwegian state budget through arrangements such as unemployment benefit, sick pay, pension and financial assistance.

Method

This article is based on two empirical studies from the same research project at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in the south of Norway called "Leadership and client orientation in NAV". The research design led to a qualitative interview method being used to collect and analyse the opinions and experiences of the interviewees (Merriam, 2009). The aim of conducting the two empirical studies was to research experiences, interactions and processes, whereby qualitative interviewing is suitable (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

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A critical comment that can be made about the method is that the interviewees are perceived as being very conscientious and loyal to their employer. This may have affected their response.

Sample

The sample consists of 32 qualitative interviews. The interviewees were recruited through strategic selection based on two inclusion criteria: 1.) That they were leaders and counsellors in NAV; 2.) That they were in the age range 26-65 years. In the first study, 16 interviews were conducted with leaders, and in the second study, 16 interviews were conducted with counsellors. The sample was recruited from both small and large NAV offices across the county.

Transcription and analysis

The transcriptions of the interviews were in standard written language. The sum of the interviews consisted of 36 hours of audio recordings. In total, the transcribed interviews constitute 162 pages of text. The interviews were read thoroughly after transcription in an attempt to establish a holistic overview of the content (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The interviews were then reread to find key words and bits of information that were interesting and potentially important to answering the research questions. The tags and bits of information were noted in the margin of the transcribed interviews in a process called coding (Merriam, 2009). These codes were then systematised into groups in a process Merriam (2009) calls analytical coding. This was an inductive process and the codes that belonged together then formed the main categories in the study following a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethics

All the participants were anonymised and treated confidentially. In connection with the notice of the interview, information about the study and a consent form was sent out to the sample. The interviewees were informed about what was to happen before each interview. The audio

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recordings from the interviews were locked in the project manager's office and stored on an external hard drive. The transcribed material was only read by the researchers. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the project "Leadership and client orientation in NAV" with project number 55412. In accordance with the approval, all audio recordings were deleted at the end of May 2019.

Results and analysis

Contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors

Leaders and counsellors use different rationalities to conceptualise their work situations in NAV (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018). Leaders have to focus on economic goals, while most of the counsellors want to do their best for the clients no matter the cost. The interviewees describe a shift in NAV from quantity linked to finance and measurement of the total production, to quality and the results of their work with the individual client:

> We see a shift towards focusing more on quality. Initially when NAV was established, there was a huge focus on quantity and counts. We now see a shift where we are being challenged on what results we achieve. Yes, finances and the numbers we have been measuring have gone well, and this has enabled us to focus more on quality and the quality of client meetings. Pulling the load together and good leadership are everything. The long speeches are so bureaucratic. I want to work efficiently, properly and smoothly, for our office.

In an ideal situation, leaders and counsellors should take both economic efficiency and client satisfaction into account. At the same time, optimising client satisfaction can affect strictly economic goals. These contradictory demands make the leader's and counsellors' workday a stress field in which the ability to meet one requirement does affect the possibility of fulfilling another requirement negatively (McGivern, et.al, 2015).

> There are huge expectations, both in terms of finance and savings, in professional results and in many other areas. So there are ... I would say, expectations ... with a very wide breadth. We are expected to deliver equally on all fronts.

Another work demand referred to in the interviews is the ambition to develop a common NAV culture. The interviewees believe that the long-serving counsellors who experienced a sense of

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mastery in their former agencies find it challenging to relate to new work demands. “It's one NAV. Not state and municipality. Some of the long-serving counsellors in a department said ‘we don’t like that’ and I then had to ask ‘who do you mean by we?’” This quote shows how NAV is developing new cultural patterns and how former organisational identity collides with a new and uniform identity.

> It seems strange that although it’s years since the office was established, the long-serving counsellors are still obstinate in relation to some areas, which is not something we see in the new counsellors. Nor has the management necessarily been instrumental in ensuring the cultures blend together, because the structures have been fairly separate, and structure has gone before culture. We try to merge the structures to change the culture.

The above quote shows the role-making processes between leaders and counsellors and the exchange relationship between them (Tummers & Knies, 2013). In NAV, counsellors from the former agencies influence the newly-hired counsellors, in what we call “horizontal dyads”. In the vertical dyad, the leaders’ attempts to have dialogue with both long-serving and newly-hired counsellors will differ in quality (Yukl, 2010). Functional relationships are characterised by mechanisms of reciprocity and social exchange, which become effective through mutual trust and counsellors’ sense of being valued by their leaders (Tummers & Knies, 2013).

Communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV

The interviewees describe counsellors who wish to help and do their best for clients, and those who are more concerned with enforcing the rules and not as interested in working relationships with the users (Cf. Bjerge & Bjerregaard, 2017). At the same time, and according to the interviews, these apparent contradictions are not perceived as conflicting extremes because NAV needs a) counsellors who are able to communicate well with clients, and b) counsellors who have the ability to enforce a regulatory framework. The ideal counsellor is described as having personal qualities that combine both the communicative and regulative aspects of working. Although ideally it would be possible to manage and measure

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production as well as communication and relationships with the clients, several of the interviewees expressed that relationships cannot be measured and that it is not meaningful to put numbers on the guidance of clients. Several counsellors express a work ethos of wishing to make a real life difference for the clients (Byrkjeflot, 2008; Lundqvist, 1998). This is not simply a matter of talking to the clients because their life situation is difficult, but also about taking time and recognising them as individuals. Symbolic rationality in NAV means that both counsellors and leaders combine communicative and regulative aspects of working.

> What I want in my office is counsellors who are just about in between. Who have the ability to enforce a regulatory framework, not with pleasure, but they do it at least, and who also have human characteristics and can communicate with clients. These are personal qualities that I look for which give me the opportunity to shape them, as I want.

> Listening to them (...) it's tough to not be in work, it's tough to be sick. It's not that hard to understand. I never think that you can measure everything. But they're measuring a lot, which is fine, but I don't think our job is fully measurable.

Digital Production Management as a means of leadership control

In addition to DPM's technical and financial function of generating statistics about the work in NAV, it also has a symbolic power that can be used to develop the dialogue between leaders and counsellors in public agencies (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018). Several counsellors assert that DPM is an auxiliary tool, while they also clearly refer to the control aspect of the tool (Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). This may concern the leaders' monitoring of the counsellors in their work situations as well as managing the team. In NAV, the leader can also use meetings to supervise the team in practice at both the group and individual level. According to the counsellors, this can lead to stress in the work situation if the leader's ability to monitor them leads to an increased workload beyond their normal working hours.

> It makes sense, but it does constitute an element of control at the same time. There is a risk of taking on extra work because I only have to do it this week so it doesn't appear in DPM when she comes in and checks.

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> Yes, but there's not always that much discussion at the meetings, it's more a matter of concluding that last week we only dealt with "six things out of 50". Things are summarised (…). I miss more discussion about how to make the team function internally.

The above quotes show a fairly strong critique of the monitoring aspect relating to DPM. At the same time, the counsellors recognise the need for control and overview of the amount of cases both they and the leader take on. They believe that the leader requires a degree of monitoring in order for the team to function optimally. The critique concerns the fact that surveillance can easily be misused and create a work overload. This is an example of how a technological tool such as DPM can function as a blueprint for the organisation of work in public agencies. DPM can thus be analysed as a cultural force field, or perhaps as a cultural container, in which many different types of factors in a society are dealt with and expressed. DPM in NAV is a blueprint which entails aspects of surveillance and control (Power, 1999; Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). Symbolic rationality related to DPM in NAV means that leaders and counsellors are simultaneously aware of, and use, both the monitoring and relational aspects of the system.

The symbolic rationality of work ethos and worldview in NAV

Symbolic rationality in NAV presents a coherent description of leaders' and counsellors' work situation (Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). Important parts of such a description are the social, political, moral and ideological circumstances in which NAV operates. Another important aspect, according to the interviewees, consists of fulfilling its social mission by meeting and helping the client. It is not just about economic efficiency or reducing dependency on financial assistance as much as possible:

> I think that the social mission is safeguarded through individual conversations. Every single client is just as important, so it's our vision to give people opportunities, and that is what we do every day through the client conversations. It helps to meet the social mission. The social mission is met through the meetings with the clients.

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Another part of the description is financial and concerns the central function of DPM . NAV needs to clarify how measurements of counsellors' work with clients should be used and what role DPM should have in the organisation. The central assumption is that the number of parameters to be measured should be kept as low as possible, and that the results of the measurements should be used to investigate what direct effects the efforts have had on the client, rather than using them to check the work of individual counsellors (Schaefer & Lynch, 2015):

> It is naturally the social benefit that is important. Whether we have 10 or 50 on a result sheet is not necessarily so important because it's the quality of the work performed that is crucial. What Vågeng has said is that there is far too much counting, and that we must switch to the effects of the measures. Balanced scorecards are fine, but we shouldn't have to measure have too many indicators.

Another element of symbolic rationality in NAV concerns the character of leadership and the cultures of the three previous authorities on which NAV was "built". The formation of a coherent NAV culture provides the possibility to create work meaningfulness and higher job performance (Dulebohn et.al, 2012). The interviewees describe how many former managers were preoccupied with measurements and goal management and that they almost ignored the relational aspect of leadership. This is an example of transactional leadership (Burns, 1978; Yukl, 2010). The interviewees ask for more transformational leadership where they are involved in decision-making, and where dialogue with their leaders underpins the sense of meaning and mastery in relation to their job (Bass and Avolio, 1990a; Tummers & Knies, 2013). According to the interviewees, the current leadership strategies in NAV focus on financial aspects and using DPM to measure work efforts, while also developing the relational dialogue with the counsellors:

> What leadership is in NAV? That's a difficult question because there are many ways to talk about leadership. I think there's a link to the three previous cultures that make up NAV. I don't think at the top level that we have properly become NAV either. I think the county director has played a role in how leadership is exercised in the different counties, and I don't know for sure, but different counties have developed differently based on the

> type of county director they have, and which previous agency they came from. We had a leader from the previous social security agency who focused a lot on goals and results, and very little on other stuff.

The symbolic rationality of NAV's activities also encompasses a national cultural element that does not have to be taken into account in the other Nordic welfare systems. For example, in Sweden over the past 30 years, the focus and volume of the production of welfare services has been centralised under national political control (Lundquist, 1998). Centralisation has led to the alignment of, for example, the Social Insurance Office and the Employment Service. Norway has a very strong municipal political mandate, which gives the welfare system a considerable decision-making mandate and a great scope of action at the local level. This means that a balance must be struck in the management of NAV between the central state level and the local municipal level. This is an example of hybrid professionalism of leaders and organisational logics in mixed structures (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018, p. 30). This has enabled the various municipalities to focus on parts of "their" NAV:

> The expectations of me as a leader in NAV are a challenge because we have two management lines, and two different sets of expectations, from my counsellor in the municipality and my director in the county. This in itself is a suboptimal solution, but there are differences between my powers of authority on the municipal and state side. I have more professional influence on the municipal side than on the state side. Fortunately, thus is resolved on some extent on the state side, but there is still a lot of goal management, while I set my goals myself to a much greater extent on the municipal side. There are two different budgets and two different bosses. It's a partnership where we meet annually and talk together, so we find out. It isn't a problem.

The symbolic rationality of NAV consists of organisational, moral and evaluative aspects, which can be summed up in the term work ethos. The work ethos consists of the tone, quality and character of counsellors' and leaders' behaviour in the everyday work of NAV. The tone expresses the leaders' and counsellors' solidarity with and commitment to the client's situation. The quality and character of the NAV work ethos empowers and guides clients through the system. In NAV, another work ethos consists of the deeper job satisfaction attained by helping clients achieve a better everyday life (Byrkjeflot, 2008; Lundqvist, 1998).

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> I started working to make a difference for people, without necessarily solving every problem they have. And it's not like I've got time to sit and talk to someone just because they're sad, that's not what I mean, but it's a matter of actually taking the time to talk to them.

The worldview, strongly related to work ethos, shows the reality of NAV's social mandate, objective and functionality. The social mandate means that Norway deems it important to finance and run a welfare system for its inhabitants. The objective and functionality includes more people in work and activity, fewer receiving financial assistance, a well-functioning labour market, good services adapted to the client's requirements and a wholesome and effective work and welfare management. This is symbolic rationality expressed through a set of coherent ideas about NAV's activities and their consistency, and the sequence in which they are performed (Geertz, 1973). In an organisational theory context, NAV is not just a technically neutral bureaucracy; it includes the counsellors' and leaders' work ethos (Cf. Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018).

Summary

Systems of value-laden symbols in NAV synthesise leaders' and counsellors' ways of performing their work based on their perception of the fundamental nature of the organisation (Tummers & Knies, 2013; Yukl, 2010). An example is the traditional perception of NAV as a bureaucratic and strictly production-oriented authority based on economic rationality, in which both leaders and counsellors behave in a calculated and rule-governed way towards the client (Brodkin, 2008). This study presents an organisational cultural pattern that challenges the bureaucratic and economic one (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018). The pattern concerns both strictly economic matters focusing on numbers, and more relational and emotional aspects linked to the client (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018). Leaders and counsellors in NAV use the symbols as resources to communicate their ambitions, define goals, coordinate work and develop a collective identity. However, cultural symbols often carry

multiple and sometimes conflicting messages (Hatch, 2018). Leaders and employees in NAV have to combine competencies, practices and values, and, at the same time, focus on both professional interests and organisational goals (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018; Carvalho 2014; Blomgren and Waks 2015). The leader must measure the counsellors' work performance and manage the direction and quality of the work (Bovens & Stavros, 2002). At the same time, the leader must protect democracy in the workplace through dialogue with the counsellor (Edmondson, 2019). The leader should also strive for economic efficiency, meet clients' needs, have optimal administration and establish peace to work within and between different professions working in the business (McGivern, et.al., 2015).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The study focus on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management. It presents the concept of symbolic rationality in an attempt to characterise relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV. The study tries to answer the following research question: How are relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV affected by demands in the intersection between economic, administrative and client-oriented work tasks? The study found (a) contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors, (b) communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV, and (c) that leaders use DPM to control employees. The aspects (a) to (c) show a specific worldview in NAV.

The study also found aspects of work ethos in NAV, such as a strong will to help and do well for the user, and at the same time meet NAV's financial and administrative requirements (Lundquist, 1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008). It is fruitful to describe this situation using the concept of symbolic rationality. What, then, is symbolic rationality in the public sector? At a more abstract level, symbolic rationality is a system of symbols with interacting meanings, which

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are historically constructed, socially maintained and individually applied (Goodsell, 1977; Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). At a more tangible level, the study conclude that both leaders and counsellors face paradoxical demands. The requirements include simultaneously achieving economic efficiency, digital administration and control, positive effects for the client and professional satisfaction. These demands have a negative effect on each other. If one requirement is achieved, it will often have a negative effect on another. This organisational logic needs a reciprocal working relationship between leaders and counsellors. Reciprocity in this context means that leaders and counsellors need mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other's responsibilities and duties. These simultaneous contradictory demands are at the heart of symbolic rationality in the public sector.

Another conclusion is linked to counsellors in NAV, and, by categorising their work performance as counsellorship, the study indicate aspects that can contribute to reframing the way counsellors conduct their work. Firstly, counsellorship can be about meeting the client with respect and recognition. Secondly, it can be about interacting with colleagues and leaders in the same way. Counsellorship is thus close to leadership, which, in short, means that dialogue, recognition and transparency are key values in the reciprocal function of both roles.

Through symbolic rationality, the study has identified the possibility for further research on the hybrid professionalism of leadership and counsellorship, at three levels in the ambidextrous public sector. The first is the epistemological level, where the concept sets limits on how a social situation such as NAV can be spoken about and understood. A second level is the theoretical level, where categories and logics can be formed that are seen as being applicable to work in NAV. The third and final level is the practical level, where the concept of symbolic rationality and the meanings connected with it shape leaders' and counsellors' professional practice in the public sector.

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Symbolic Rationality in the Public Sector

Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The study focus on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management. Leaders and employees in NAV have to combine competencies, practices and values, and, at the same time, focus on both professional interests and organisational goals. The study found (a) that leaders use DPM to control employees, (b) communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV, (c) contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors, and (d) the symbolic rationality of work in NAV. The aspects (a) to (d) show a specific worldview in NAV. The study show a reciprocity, which means that leaders and counsellors need mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other's responsibilities and duties. It is fruitful to describe this situation in the public sector through the concept of symbolic rationality.

Key words

Leadership, counsellorship, symbolic rationality, public sector, reciprocal, ambidextrous.

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Introduction

Leadership research has focused, during different periods, on leaders' traits, behaviours and the situations in which leadership is exercised. Theories of leadership are today often hybrids of traits, behaviours and contexts (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). This perspective also involves a hybrid professionalism of leaders, which "combines professional and organisational logics in mixed structures, mixed forms of coordination (by multiple governance mechanisms), mixed management and mixed professionalism" (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018, p. 30). Yukl & Gardner (2020, p. 26) defines leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives". Working as a leader in the public sector in this context is subject to a number of challenges (Wallo, et.al. 2013). On the one hand, increasing digitalisation of the public sector with electronic processing gives the leader the opportunity to monitor employees (Power, 1999; Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). On the other hand, the employee's integrity and rights are important areas which the leader must safeguard. At the same time, the leader must be the official who fulfils the social tasks of the business based on the Social Services Act, and the facilitator who helps employees guide clients to overcome their life difficulties. The leader must also address the conflict that can arise between the employee's work ethos, which means a strong will to help and do well for the user, and the organisation's financial and administrative requirements, which means complying with the budget and with laws (Lundquist, 1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008).

The category of employee has different meanings depending on the context it is used in. Unclear conceptualisation of how certain job characteristics, such as job meaningfulness, role-making processes and workload control, affect the reciprocal relations between leaders and employees. Leaders and employees drive one another and develop together in a work environment characterised by high acceptance of different opinions, which can be creative

forces when people have autonomy in their work situation (Smith et.al. 2008). Good collaboration involves both leaders and employees taking personal responsibility for their work and the working environment (Arfaeya, 2008). When leaders and employees collaborate, a smooth and innovative work environment is created where people dare to experiment and fail. The support of leaders, autonomy, cooperation and the internal climate are factors that influence an employee's ability to fulfil job demands (Smith et.al, 2008).

The aim of this article is to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). We focus on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management. The article presents the concept of symbolic rationality in an attempt to characterise relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV. In the article, we try to answer the following research question: How are relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV affected by symbolic rationalities in the intersection between economic, administrative and client-oriented work tasks?

Theory

Transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX)

Transformational leadership is a values-based style of leadership that distinguishes between transaction and transformation (Burns, 1978; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). This perspective differs from a simplified causal and transactional understanding of leadership where desirable behaviour is rewarded and undesirable behaviour is punished (Burns, 1978). Transactional leadership involves an almost ideal mathematical causal understanding of cause and effect in the leadership context (O`Neill, 1989). Transformational leadership emphasises inspiring employees to do their best by developing a vision, using symbols and setting a good example (Goodsell, 1977; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Leaders involve their employees and follow them up in a personal manner that underpins their sense of meaning and mastery in relation to their job (Bass and Avolio, 1990a; Tummers & Knies, 2013). The use of transformational

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leadership today focuses on change and promotes values-based and relationship-based leadership, which can reverse and possibly prevent leadership failure due to pure economic leadership rationality (Van Wart, 2003; Kellis & Bing, 2015).

Leader-member exchange (LMX) is defined as a leadership practice linked to the meaningfulness of and commitment to the employees' work situation (Tummers & Knies, 2013). Research shows that LMX affects work meaningfulness, which, in turn, influences job outcomes such as lower turnover, higher job performance, higher job satisfaction and higher perceived procedural empowerment (Dulebohn et.al, 2012). LMX describes the role-making processes between a leader and individual employees and the exchange relationship between them (Yukl & Gardner, 2020, p. 276). The theory focuses on "reciprocal influence processes within vertical dyads composed of one person who has direct authority over another person" (Yukl, 2010, p. 235). Different leaders will get along differently with different employees, and LMX describes the quality of the relationship between a leader and an employee. The leader may have "favourites" and less favoured members of staff. In low-LMX relationships, there is mainly an economic exchange between leaders and employees, exemplified by employees investing their working time to get money in exchange. High-LMX relationships are, on one hand, characterised by mechanisms of reciprocity and social exchange which become effective through mutual trust and employees' sense of being valued by their leaders (Tummers & Knies, 2013). On the other hand, there is a concern that there will be less compliance if the leaders' "favourites" get more benefits than they deserve (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

Public sector is an ambidextrous organisation with substantional goal complexity and ambiguity (Zacher & Rosing, 2015; Tummers & Knies, 2013). So how leaders influence job characteristics, such as job meaningfulness, role-making processes and workload control in the intersection between LMX-exchange and organisational commitment is crucial.

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Complexity in the public sector requires leaders who balance their administrative practices with the adaptive practices needed to respond to dynamic circumstances and tensions in their leadership (Murphy, Rhodes, Meek & Denyer, 2017). Tensions who raises in the intersection between relations, economics, change and the symbols who represents these tensions (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018).

Symbolism

A symbol can be seen as a part of the interpretive aspects that make up organisational culture (Hatch, 2018; Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). This is known as a form of symbolism in which organisational structures, professional roles and leadership, beyond purely functional meanings, say something about moral and values. Examples of situations, which are both practical and symbolic, can be dialogues between leaders and employees, organisational hierarchies and digitalisation of documentation procedures in the public sector. Symbols in organisations may also be tools in the decision process, in which there are assumptions, values, goals, creation of meaning and a purpose for symbolic activity that differ between manipulation and inspiration (Mason, 1994; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Symbols are socially formed and the meanings related to them are interpreted through three mechanisms: externalization, objectification, and internalization (Hatch, 2018). Externalization explain how meanings are carried and communicated through symbols. Objectification explain how intersubjectively produced understandings appear to be objectively real. Internalization explain how one "accepts the intersubjectively externalized and objectified understandings of a social group as real" (Hatch, 2018, p. 40). A weakness of the symbolic perspective is that it does not emphasize the wide array of knowledge processes, and how individuals can learn implicit relations among objects and store it in the memory (Lord & Shondrick, 2011).

Leaders and employees in the public sector have a strong work ethos connected to symbols as democracy, social responsibility, rule of law, and equal treatment of the citizens (Lundquist,

1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008). These symbols and the meanings related to them are socialized through the social formation of the public sector. This article introduces the concept of symbolic rationality in the context of organisational analysis in the public sector. The concept was developed under a research programme on "Leadership and client orientation in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)". In the article, symbolic rationality is not discussed in relation to decision theory in particular, nor does it take a purely philosophical approach (Cabantous, et.al, 2010). Instead, we take an approach that involves endeavouring to understand how a category such as symbolic rationality can be assigned meanings and how these meanings can be used to describe relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV (Cf. Hacking, 1999).

Dynamic nominalism as an epistemology of work in the public sector

The article's starting points can be linked to dynamic nominalism that is fruitful to use when, as a researcher, you have a combined relativistic and problematic approach in trying to describe and understand work as leaders and counsellors in the public sector. Dynamic nominalism understands the connection between reality and symbols to talk about it with as relational. The way we talk about a social phenomenon, such as work in the public sector, with a specific set of categories (symbols) gives us a limited set of possibilities for action (Hacking, 1999). Furthermore, dynamic nominalism is a key starting point for those researchers who use "constructionism" as a framework for comprehension in their studies (Hacking, 1999). This article does not have a "constructionism" approach, as there are a number of problematic circumstances in the use of "constructionism" embedded in the concept itself. A first problematic circumstance is covered by the implicit intentionality that the term "constructionism" indicates. This implies that behind each constructed socio-cultural phenomenon, in this case, work in the public sector, there is a specific set of actors, or forces that have specific intentions with the design. To understand the socio-cultural phenomenon

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means to identify the different actors and their intentions. Intentionality also holds a metaphysical aspect, meaning that actors, powers and intentions are not part of work in public sector as a socio-cultural phenomenon, but they are located beyond it. Another problematic circumstance with "constructionism" as an analytical concept is that it both confronts and appeals to a machine metaphor in understanding the public sectors internal logic and external touch points. The understanding of both public sector and work in it, as machine mechanics excludes the possibility of generating knowledge about both in many cases, amorphous, inconsistent, illogical and paradoxical character, since strict engineering understanding regards these as anomalies. To understand work in the public sector with a machine metaphor, as the use of "constructionism" indicates, attributes a strong ontological status, which means that it has a clear temporal starting point, a clear spatial location as well as a clear and delimited material body. This also distracts the attention from the ambidextrous and paradoxical character of work in the public sector, which appears to be central aspects in an attempt to create knowledge about the relation between symbolism and work (Cf. Hacking, 1999).

Conceptual framings of rationality

Rational aspects of the NAV organisation can be studied from many different perspectives. One perspective is theoretical rationality, another is practical rationality, while a third is rationality in connection with decisions. From a philosophy of science perspective, a majority of scientists have discussed whether, and in what way, rationality has an ontological status as something that is fundamentally human. Others believe that rationality is shaped and constructed by different actors in different social situations (Audi, 2004). When rationality is discussed in a public welfare organisation such as NAV, it is largely linked to reason and what is not random (Weber, 2000). Weber (2000) distinguishes between two ideal types of rationality. Goal rationality is when a leader chooses the most expedient means of achieving

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the goal. Value rationality is how a certain way of acting has a clear intrinsic value that can be justified from an ethical, aesthetic or religious perspective (Weber, 2000). Simon distinguishes between subjectively and objectively rational decisions (Simon, 1976). Among other things, he discusses whether a leader is subjectively rational when they do what they believe is best, or whether the leader is objectively rational if the action is actually the best option. Our discussion of rationality in this article is directly linked to the use of Digital Production Management (DPM) in NAV and to the ambition of establishing metric knowledge, through measuring and counting, which can be used to plan and optimise the organisation in a rational manner. However, DPM does not only appear to have a measurement function. It is interesting that a rational, technical and instrumental tool like DPM can also be used to develop "smoother" dialogues between leaders and counsellors in NAV (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018; Schaefer & Lynch, 2015). A "smoother" dialogue means that leaders can use administrative statistics in their relational interaction with counsellors.

Traditional leadership research, such as transformational leadership and leader-member-exchange, has an epistemological starting point, with a rational basis. At the same time, today's public sector is paradoxical and inconsistent. Many of the established theories are also superior and say little about leadership in practice. There seems to be a research gap here between today's leadership practice and the established overall theories. In this article, we try to elaborate NAV practices with a new epistemology that symbolic rationality is central to. The intention is to bridge the gap between superior theory and practice in NAV.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)

NAV consists of the former unemployment agency, social security agency and municipal social services in Norway. The municipalities and the state cooperate on finding solutions for clients through 456 NAV offices. NAV has around 19,000 employees, around 14,000 of

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whom are employed by the state, while around 5,000 are municipal employees. The agency manages one third of the Norwegian state budget through arrangements such as unemployment benefit, sick pay, pension and financial assistance.

Method

This article is based on two empirical studies from the same research project at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in the south of Norway called "Leadership and client orientation in NAV". The research design led to the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews to collect and analyse the opinions and experiences of the interviewees (Merriam, 2009). The aim of conducting the two empirical studies was to research experiences, interactions and processes, whereby qualitative interviewing is suitable (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

A critical comment that can be made about the method is that the interviewees are perceived as being very conscientious and loyal to their employer. This may have affected their response.

Sample

The sample consists of 32 qualitative interviews. The interviewees were recruited through strategic selection based on two inclusion criteria: 1.) That they were leaders and counsellors in NAV; 2.) That they were in the age range 26-65 years. In the first study, 16 interviews were conducted with leaders, and in the second study, 16 interviews were conducted with counsellors. The sample was recruited from both small and large NAV offices across the county.

Transcription and analysis

The transcriptions of the interviews were in standard written language. The sum of the interviews consisted of 36 hours of audio recordings. In total, the transcribed interviews constitute 162 pages of text. The interviews were read thoroughly after transcription in an

attempt to establish a holistic overview of the content (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The interviews were then reread to find key words and bits of information that were interesting and potentially important to answering the research questions. The tags and bits of information were noted in the margin of the transcribed interviews in a process called coding (Merriam, 2009). These codes were then systematised into groups in a process Merriam (2009) calls analytical coding. This was an inductive process and the codes that belonged together then formed the main categories in the study following a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both researchers where involved in the manual coding which reduced the risk of unbiasedness.

Ethics

All the participants were anonymised and treated confidentially. In connection with the notice of the interview, information about the study and a consent form was sent out to the sample. The interviewees were informed about what was to happen before each interview. The audio recordings from the interviews were locked in the project manager's office and stored on an external hard drive. The transcribed material was only read by the researchers. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the project “Leadership and client orientation in NAV” with project number 55412. In accordance with the approval, all audio recordings were deleted at the end of May 2019.

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Results and analysis

Table 1Main and underlying themes

Main theme 1	**Digital production management for control and dialogue**
Underlying theme	The symbolic power of digital production management
Underlying theme	Misuse of surveillance create work overload
Underlying theme	Symbolic rationality of DPM entails surveillance and relations
Main theme 2	**Communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV**
Underlying theme	Combination of regulation and communication
Underlying theme	Enforcing rules and do best for client
Underlying theme	Contradicting demands not conflicting
Main theme 3	**Contradictory simultaneous work demands**
Underlying theme	From administrative measurement to client effects
Underlying theme	Exchange role-making processes between leaders and counsellors
Underlying theme	Functional reciprocal relationships based on trust
Main theme 4	**The symbolic rationality of work in NAV**
Underlying theme	Symbolic rationality of NAV are summed up in the term work ethos.
Underlying theme	The worldview shows the reality of NAV's social mandate, objective and functionality.
Underlying theme	Symbolic rationality in NAV presents leaders' and counsellors' work situation

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Digital Production Management as a means of leadership control

In addition to DPM's technical and financial function of generating statistics about the work in NAV, it also has a symbolic power that can be used to develop the dialogue between leaders and counsellors in public agencies (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018). Several counsellors assert that DPM is an auxiliary tool, while they also clearly refer to the control aspect of the tool (Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). This may concern the leaders' monitoring of the counsellors in their work situations as well as managing the team. In NAV, the leader can also use meetings to supervise the team in practice at both the group and individual level. According to the counsellors, this can lead to stress in the work situation if the leader's ability to monitor them leads to an increased workload beyond their normal working hours.

> It makes sense, but it does constitute an element of control at the same time. There is a risk of taking on extra work because I only have to do it this week so it doesn't appear in DPM when she comes in and checks.

> Yes, but there's not always that much discussion at the meetings, it's more a matter of concluding that last week we only dealt with "six things out of 50". Things are summarised (…). I miss more discussion about how to make the team function internally.

The above quotes show a fairly strong critique of the monitoring aspect relating to DPM. At the same time, the counsellors recognise the need for control and overview of the amount of cases both they and the leader take on. They believe that the leader requires a degree of monitoring in order for the team to function optimally. The critique concerns the fact that surveillance can easily be misused and create a work overload. This is an example of how a technological tool such as DPM can function as a blueprint for the organisation of work in public agencies. DPM can thus be analysed as a cultural force field, or perhaps as a cultural container, in which many different types of factors in a society are dealt with and expressed. DPM in NAV is a blueprint which entails aspects of surveillance and control (Power, 1999; Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). Symbolic rationality related to DPM in NAV means that

leaders and counsellors are simultaneously aware of, and use, both the monitoring and relational aspects of the system.

Communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV

The interviewees describe counsellors who wish to help and do their best for clients, and those who are more concerned with enforcing the rules and not as interested in working relationships with the users (Cf. Bjerge & Bjerregaard, 2017). At the same time, and according to the interviews, these apparent contradictions are not perceived as conflicting extremes because NAV needs a) counsellors who are able to communicate well with clients, and b) counsellors who have the ability to enforce a regulatory framework. The ideal counsellor is described as having personal qualities that combine both the communicative and regulative aspects of working. Although ideally it would be possible to manage and measure production as well as communication and relationships with the clients, several of the interviewees expressed that relationships cannot be measured and that it is not meaningful to put numbers on the guidance of clients. Several counsellors express a work ethos of wishing to make a real life difference for the clients (Byrkjeflot, 2008; Lundqvist, 1998). This is not simply a matter of talking to the clients because their life situation is difficult, but also about taking time and recognising them as individuals. Symbolic rationality in NAV means that both counsellors and leaders combine communicative and regulative aspects of working.

> What I want in my office is counsellors who are just about in between. Who have the ability to enforce a regulatory framework, not with pleasure, but they do it at least, and who also have human characteristics and can communicate with clients. These are personal qualities that I look for which give me the opportunity to shape them, as I want.

> Listening to them (...) it's tough to not be in work, it's tough to be sick. It's not that hard to understand. I never think that you can measure everything. But they're measuring a lot, which is fine, but I don't think our job is fully measurable.

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Contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors

Leaders and counsellors use different rationalities to conceptualise their work situations in NAV (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018). Leaders have to focus on economic goals, while most of the counsellors want to do their best for the clients no matter the cost. The interviewees describe a shift in NAV from quantity linked to finance and measurement of the total production, to quality and the results of their work with the individual client:

> We see a shift towards focusing more on quality. Initially when NAV was established, there was a huge focus on quantity and counts. We now see a shift where we are being challenged on what results we achieve. Yes, finances and the numbers we have been measuring have gone well, and this has enabled us to focus more on quality and the quality of client meetings. Pulling the load together and good leadership are everything. The long speeches are so bureaucratic. I want to work efficiently, properly and smoothly, for our office.

In an ideal situation, leaders and counsellors should take both economic efficiency and client satisfaction into account. At the same time, optimising client satisfaction can affect strictly economic goals. These contradictory demands make the leader's and counsellors' workday a stress field in which the ability to meet one requirement does negatively affect the possibility of fulfilling another requirement (McGivern, et.al, 2015).

> There are huge expectations, both in terms of finance and savings, in professional results and in many other areas. So there are ... I would say, expectations ... with a very wide breadth. We are expected to deliver equally on all fronts.

Another work demand referred to in the interviews is the ambition to develop a common NAV culture. The interviewees believe that the long-serving counsellors who experienced a sense of mastery in their former agencies find it challenging to relate to new work demands. "It's one NAV. Not state and municipality. Some of the long-serving counsellors in a department said 'we don't like that' and I then had to ask 'who do you mean by we?'" This quote shows how NAV is developing new cultural patterns and how former organisational identity collides with a new and uniform identity.

> It seems strange that although it's years since the office was established, the long-serving counsellors are still obstinate in relation to some areas, which is not something we see in

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> the new counsellors. Nor has the management necessarily been instrumental in ensuring the cultures blend together, because the structures have been fairly separate, and structure has gone before culture. We try to merge the structures to change the culture.

The above quote shows the role-making processes between leaders and counsellors and the exchange relationship between them (Tummers & Knies, 2013). In NAV, counsellors from the former agencies influence the newly-hired counsellors, in what we call "horizontal dyads". In the vertical dyad, the leaders' attempts to have dialogue with both long-serving and newly-hired counsellors will differ in quality (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Functional relationships are characterised by mechanisms of reciprocity and social exchange, which become effective through mutual trust and counsellors' sense of being valued by their leaders (Tummers & Knies, 2013).

The symbolic rationality of work ethos and worldview in NAV

Symbolic rationality in NAV presents a coherent description of leaders' and counsellors' work situation (Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). Important parts of such a description are the social, political, moral and ideological circumstances in which NAV operates. Another important aspect, according to the interviewees, consists of fulfilling its social mission by meeting and helping the client. It is not just about economic efficiency or reducing dependency on financial assistance as much as possible:

> I think that the social mission is safeguarded through individual conversations. Every single client is just as important, so it's our vision to give people opportunities, and that is what we do every day through the client conversations. It helps to meet the social mission. The social mission is met through the meetings with the clients.

Another part of the description is financial and concerns the central function of DPM . NAV needs to clarify how measurements of counsellors' work with clients should be used and what role DPM should have in the organisation. The central assumption is that the number of parameters to be measured should be kept as low as possible, and that the results of the measurements should be used to investigate what direct effects the efforts have had on the

client, rather than using them to check the work of individual counsellors (Schaefer & Lynch, 2015):

> It is naturally the social benefit that is important. Whether we have 10 or 50 on a result sheet is not necessarily so important because it's the quality of the work performed that is crucial. What Vågeng has said is that there is far too much counting, and that we must switch to the effects of the measures. Balanced scorecards are fine, but we shouldn't have to measure have too many indicators.

Another element of symbolic rationality in NAV concerns the character of leadership and the cultures of the three previous authorities on which NAV was "built". The formation of a coherent NAV culture provides the possibility to create work meaningfulness and higher job performance (Dulebohn et.al, 2012). The interviewees describe how many former managers were preoccupied with measurements and goal management and that they almost ignored the relational aspect of leadership. This is an example of transactional leadership (Burns, 1978; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). The interviewees ask for more transformational leadership where they are involved in decision-making, and where dialogue with their leaders underpins the sense of meaning and mastery in relation to their job (Bass and Avolio, 1990a; Tummers & Knies, 2013). According to the interviewees, the current leadership strategies in NAV focus on financial aspects and using DPM to measure work efforts, while also developing the relational dialogue with the counsellors:

> What leadership is in NAV? That's a difficult question because there are many ways to talk about leadership. I think there's a link to the three previous cultures that make up NAV. I don't think at the top level that we have properly become NAV either. I think the county director has played a role in how leadership is exercised in the different counties, and I don't know for sure, but different counties have developed differently based on the type of county director they have, and which previous agency they came from. We had a leader from the previous social security agency who focused a lot on goals and results, and very little on other stuff.

The symbolic rationality of NAV's activities also encompasses a national cultural element that does not have to be taken into account in the other Nordic welfare systems. For example, in Sweden over the past 30 years, the focus and volume of the production of welfare services has

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been centralised under national political control (Lundquist, 1998). Centralisation has led to the alignment of, for example, the Social Insurance Office and the Employment Service. Norway has a very strong municipal political mandate, which gives the welfare system a considerable decision-making mandate and a great scope of action at the local level. This means that a balance must be struck in the management of NAV between the central state level and the local municipal level. This is an example of hybrid professionalism of leaders and organisational logics in mixed structures (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018, p. 30). This has enabled the various municipalities to focus on parts of "their" NAV:

> The expectations of me as a leader in NAV are a challenge because we have two management lines, and two different sets of expectations, from my counsellor in the municipality and my director in the county. This in itself is a suboptimal solution, but there are differences between my powers of authority on the municipal and state side. I have more professional influence on the municipal side than on the state side. Fortunately, thus is resolved on some extent on the state side, but there is still a lot of goal management, while I set my goals myself to a much greater extent on the municipal side. There are two different budgets and two different bosses. It's a partnership where we meet annually and talk together, so we find out. It isn't a problem.

The symbolic rationality of NAV consists of organisational, moral and evaluative aspects, which can be summed up in the term work ethos. The work ethos consists of the tone, quality and character of counsellors' and leaders' behaviour in the everyday work of NAV. The tone expresses the leaders' and counsellors' solidarity with and commitment to the client's situation. The quality and character of the NAV work ethos empowers and guides clients through the system. In NAV, another work ethos consists of the deeper job satisfaction attained by helping clients achieve a better everyday life (Byrkjeflot, 2008; Lundqvist, 1998).

> I started working to make a difference for people, without necessarily solving every problem they have. And it's not like I've got time to sit and talk to someone just because they're sad, that's not what I mean, but it's a matter of actually taking the time to talk to them.

The worldview, strongly related to work ethos, shows the reality of NAV's social mandate, objective and functionality. The social mandate means that Norway deems it important to

finance and run a welfare system for its inhabitants. The objective and functionality includes more people in work and activity, fewer receiving financial assistance, a well-functioning labour market, good services adapted to the client's requirements and a wholesome and effective work and welfare management. This is symbolic rationality expressed through a set of coherent ideas about NAV's activities and their consistency, and the sequence in which they are performed (Geertz, 1973). In an organisational theory context, NAV is not just a technically neutral bureaucracy; it includes the counsellors' and leaders' work ethos (Cf. Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018).

Summary

Systems of value-laden symbols in NAV synthesise leaders' and counsellors' ways of performing their work based on their perception of the fundamental nature of the organisation (Tummers & Knies, 2013; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). An example is the traditional perception of NAV as a bureaucratic and strictly production-oriented authority based on economic rationality, in which both leaders and counsellors behave in a calculated and rule-governed way towards the client (Brodkin, 2008). This study presents an organisational cultural pattern that challenges the bureaucratic and economic one (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018). The pattern concerns both strictly economic matters focusing on numbers, and more relational and emotional aspects linked to the client (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018). Leaders and counsellors in NAV use the symbols as resources to communicate their ambitions, define goals, coordinate work and develop a collective identity. However, cultural symbols often carry multiple and sometimes conflicting messages (Hatch, 2018). Leaders and employees in NAV have to combine competencies, practices and values, and, at the same time, focus on both professional interests and organisational goals (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018; Carvalho 2014; Blomgren and Waks 2015). The leader must measure the counsellors' work performance and manage the direction and quality of the work (Bovens & Stavros, 2002). At

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the same time, the leader must protect democracy in the workplace through dialogue with the counsellor (Edmondson, 2019). The leader should also strive for economic efficiency, meet clients' needs, have optimal administration and establish peace to work within and between different professions working in the business (McGivern, et.al., 2015).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The study focus on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management. It presents the concept of symbolic rationality in an attempt to characterise relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV. The study tries to answer the following research question: How are relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV affected by symbolic rationalities in the intersection between economic, administrative and client-oriented work tasks? The study found (a) that leaders use DPM to control employees, (b) communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV, (c) contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors, and (d) the symbolic rationality of work in NAV. The aspects (a) to (d) show a specific worldview in NAV.

The study also found aspects of work ethos in NAV, such as a strong will to help and do well for the user, and at the same time meet NAV's financial and administrative requirements (Lundquist, 1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008). It is fruitful to describe this situation using the concept of symbolic rationality. What, then, is symbolic rationality in the public sector? At a more abstract level, symbolic rationality is a system of symbols with interacting meanings, which are historically constructed, socially maintained and individually applied (Goodsell, 1977; Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). At a more tangible level, the study conclude that both leaders and counsellors face paradoxical demands. The requirements include simultaneously achieving economic efficiency, digital administration and control, positive effects for the client and professional satisfaction. These demands have a negative effect on each other. If

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one requirement is achieved, it will often have a negative effect on another. This organisational logic needs a reciprocal working relationship between leaders and counsellors. Reciprocity in this context means that leaders and counsellors need mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other's responsibilities and duties. The dynamic nominalism of these simultaneous contradictory demands are at the heart of symbolic rationality in the public sector.

Another conclusion is linked to counsellors in NAV, and, by categorising their work performance as counsellorship, the study indicate aspects that can contribute to reframing the way counsellors conduct their work. Firstly, counsellorship can be about meeting the client with respect and recognition. Secondly, it can be about interacting with colleagues and leaders in the same way. Counsellorship is thus close to leadership, which, in short, means that dialogue, recognition and transparency are key values in the reciprocal function of both roles.

Through symbolic rationality, the study has identified the possibility for further research on the hybrid professionalism of leadership and counsellorship, at three levels in the ambidextrous public sector. The first is the epistemological level, where the concept sets limits on how a social situation such as NAV can be spoken about and understood. A second level is the theoretical level, where categories and logics can be formed that are seen as being applicable to work in NAV. The third and final level is the practical level, where the concept of symbolic rationality and the meanings connected with it shape leaders' and counsellors' professional practice in the public sector. This practice benefits from symbolic rationality to manage complexity and ambiguity at work.

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The study focuses on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management (DPM). Leaders and employees in NAV have to combine competencies, practices and values, and, at the same time, focus on both professional interests and organisational goals. The study found the following: (a) that leaders use DPM to control employees, (b) communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV, (c) contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors, and (d) the symbolic rationality of work in NAV. The aspects (a) to (d) show a specific worldview in NAV. The study shows a reciprocity, which means that leaders and counsellors need mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other's responsibilities and duties. It is fruitful to describe this situation in the public sector through the concept of symbolic rationality.

Key words

Leadership, counsellorship, symbolic rationality, public sector, reciprocal, ambidextrous

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Introduction

Leadership research have focused, during different periods, on leaders' traits, behaviours and the situations in which leadership is exercised. Nowadays, theories of leadership are often hybrids of traits, behaviours and contexts (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). This perspective also involves a hybrid professionalism of leaders, which 'combines professional and organisational logics in mixed structures, mixed forms of coordination (by multiple governance mechanisms), mixed management and mixed professionalism' (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018, p. 30). Yukl and Gardner (2020, p. 26) define leadership as 'the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives'. Working as a leader in the public sector in this context is subject to a number of challenges (Wallo et al., 2013). On the one hand, increasing digitalisation of the public sector with electronic processing gives the leader the opportunity to monitor employees (Power, 1999; Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). On the other hand, the employee's integrity and rights are important areas, which the leader must safeguard. At the same time, the leader must be the official who fulfils the social tasks of the business based on the Social Services Act, and the facilitator who helps employees guide clients to overcome life's challenges. The leader must also address the conflict that can arise between the employee's work ethos, which means a strong will to help and do the best for the client, and the organisation's financial and administrative requirements, which means complying with the budget and with laws (Lundquist, 1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008).

The category of employee has different meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. Unclear conceptualisation of certain job characteristics, such as job meaningfulness, role-making processes and workload control, affects the reciprocal relations between leaders and employees. Leaders and employees drive one another and develop together in a work

environment characterised by high acceptance of different opinions, which can be creative forces when people have autonomy in their work situation (Smith et al., 2008). Good collaboration involves both leaders and employees taking personal responsibility for their work and the working environment (Arfaeya, 2008). When leaders and employees collaborate, a smooth and innovative work environment is created where people dare to experiment and fail. The support of leaders, autonomy, cooperation and the internal climate are factors that influence an employee's ability to fulfil job demands (Smith et al., 2008).

The aim of this article is to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). We focus on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management (DPM). The article presents the concept of symbolic rationality, in an attempt to characterise relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV. In the article, we try to answer the following research question: How are relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV affected by symbolic rationalities in the intersection between economic, administrative and client-oriented work tasks?

Theory

Transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX)

Transformational leadership is a values-based style of leadership that distinguishes between transaction and transformation (Burns, 1978; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). This perspective differs from a simplified causal and transactional understanding of leadership, where desirable behaviour is rewarded and undesirable behaviour is punished (Burns, 1978). Transactional leadership involves an almost ideal mathematical causal understanding of cause and effect in the leadership context (O`Neill, 1989). Furthermore, transformational leadership emphasises inspiring employees to do their best by developing a vision, using symbols and setting a good example (Goodsell, 1977; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Leaders involve their employees and follow up with them in a personal manner that underpins their sense of meaning and mastery

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in relation to their job (Bass and Avolio, 1990a; Tummers & Knies, 2013). The use of transformational leadership today focuses on change and promotes values-based and relationship-based leadership, which can reverse and possibly prevent leadership failure due to pure economic leadership rationality (Van Wart, 2003; Kellis & Bing, 2015).

Leader-member exchange (LMX) is defined as a leadership practice linked to the meaningfulness of and commitment to the employees' work situation (Tummers & Knies, 2013). Research show that LMX affects work meaningfulness, which, in turn, influences job outcomes such as lower turnover, higher job performance, higher job satisfaction and higher perceived procedural empowerment (Dulebohn et al., 2012). LMX describes the role-making processes between a leader and individual employees and the exchange relationship between them (Yukl & Gardner, 2020, p. 276). The theory focuses on 'reciprocal influence processes within vertical dyads composed of one person who has direct authority over another person' (Yukl, 2010, p. 235). Different leaders will get along differently with different employees, and LMX describes the quality of the relationship between a leader and an employee. The leader may have "favourites" and less favoured members of staff. In low-LMX relationships, there is mainly an economic exchange between leaders and employees, exemplified by employees investing their working time in exchange for money. High-LMX relationships are, on the one hand, characterised by mechanisms of reciprocity and social exchange which become effective through mutual trust and employees' sense of being valued by their leaders (Tummers & Knies, 2013). On the other hand, there is concern that there will be less compliance if the leaders' "favourites" get more benefits than they deserve (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

Public sector is an ambidextrous organisation with substantional goal complexities and ambiguities (Zacher & Rosing, 2015; Tummers & Knies, 2013). Accordingly, how leaders influence job characteristics, such as job meaningfulness, role-making processes and

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workload control in the intersection between LMX-exchange and organisational commitment is crucial. Complexity in the public sector requires leaders who balance their administrative practices with the adaptive practices needed to respond to dynamic circumstances and tensions in their leadership (Murphy, Rhodes, Meek & Denyer, 2017). Tensions who raises in the intersection between relations, economics, change and the symbols who represents these tensions (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018).

Symbolism

A symbol can be seen as a part of the interpretive aspects that make up organisational culture (Hatch, 2018; Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). This is known as a form of symbolism in which organisational structures, professional roles and leadership, beyond purely functional meanings, say something about morals and values. Examples of situations, which are both practical and symbolic, can be dialogues between leaders and employees, organisational hierarchies and digitalisation of documentation procedures in the public sector. Symbols in organisations may also be tools in the decision-making process, in which there are assumptions, values, goals, creation of meaning and a purpose for symbolic activity that differs between manipulation and inspiration (Mason, 1994; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Symbols are socially formed and the meanings related to them are interpreted through three mechanisms: externalisation, objectification and internalisation (Hatch, 2018). Externalisation explains how meanings are carried and communicated through symbols. Objectification explains how intersubjectively produced understandings appear to be objectively real. Internalisation explains how one 'accepts the intersubjectively externalized and objectified understandings of a social group as real' (Hatch, 2018, p. 40). A weakness of the symbolic perspective is that it does not emphasise the wide array of knowledge processes, and how individuals can learn implicit relations among objects and store it in their memory (Lord & Shondrick, 2011).

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Leaders and employees in the public sector have a strong work ethos connected to symbols as democracy, social responsibility, rule of law, and equal treatment of the citizens (Lundquist, 1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008). These symbols and the meanings related to them are socialised through the social formation of the public sector. This article introduces the concept of symbolic rationality in the context of organisational analysis in the public sector. The concept was developed under a research programme on "Leadership and client orientation in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)". In the article, symbolic rationality is not discussed in relation to decision theory in particular, nor does it take a purely philosophical approach (Cabantous et al., 2010). Instead, we take an approach that involves endeavouring to understand how a category such as symbolic rationality can be assigned meanings and how these meanings can be used to describe relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV (Cf. Hacking, 1999).

Dynamic nominalism as an epistemology of work in the public sector

The article's starting points can be linked to dynamic nominalism that is fruitful to use when, as a researcher, you have a combined relativistic and problematic approach in trying to describe and understand work as leaders and counsellors in the public sector. Dynamic nominalism understands the connection between reality and symbols to talk about it as relational. The way we talk about a social phenomenon, such as work in the public sector, with a specific set of categories (symbols) gives us a limited set of possibilities for action (Hacking, 1999). Furthermore, dynamic nominalism is a key starting point for those researchers who use "constructionism" as a framework for comprehension in their studies (Hacking, 1999). This article does not have a "constructionism" approach, as there are a number of problematic circumstances in the use of "constructionism" embedded in the concept itself. One problematic circumstance is covered by the implicit intentionality that the term "constructionism" indicates. This implies that behind each constructed socio-cultural

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phenomenon, in this case, work in the public sector, there is a specific set of actors, or forces that have specific intentions with the design. To understand the socio-cultural phenomenon means to identify the different actors and their intentions. Intentionality also holds a metaphysical aspect, meaning that actors, powers and intentions are not part of work in public sector as a socio-cultural phenomenon, but they are located beyond it. Another problematic circumstance with "constructionism" as an analytical concept is that it both confronts and appeals to a machine metaphor in understanding the public sectors' internal logic and external touch points. The understanding of both the public sector and work in it, as machine mechanics, excludes the possibility of generating knowledge about both in many cases, amorphous, inconsistent, illogical and paradoxical character, since strict engineering understanding regards these as anomalies. To understand work in the public sector with a machine metaphor, as the use of "constructionism" indicates, requires to give it a strong ontological status, which means that it has a clear temporal starting point, a clear spatial location as well as a clear and delimited material body. This also distracts attention from the ambidextrous and paradoxical character of work in the public sector, which appears to be central aspects in an attempt to create knowledge about the relation between symbolism and work (cf. Hacking, 1999).

Conceptual framings of rationality

Rational aspects of the NAV organisation can be studied from many different perspectives. One perspective is theoretical rationality, another is practical rationality, while a third is rationality in connection with decisions. From a philosophy of science perspective, a majority of scientists have discussed whether, and in what way, rationality has an ontological status as something that is fundamentally human. Others believe that rationality is shaped and constructed by different actors in different social situations (Audi, 2004). When rationality is discussed in a public welfare organisation such as NAV, it is largely linked to reason and

what is not random (Weber, 2000). Weber (2000) distinguishes between two ideal types of rationality. Goal rationality is when a leader chooses the most expedient means of achieving the goal. Value rationality, in contrast, is how a certain way of acting has a clear intrinsic value that can be justified from an ethical, aesthetic or religious perspective (Weber, 2000). Simon distinguishes between subjectively and objectively rational decisions (Simon, 1976). Among other things, he discusses whether a leader is subjectively rational when he/she does what is believed to be for the best, or whether the leader is objectively rational if the action is actually the best option. Our discussion of rationality in this article is directly linked to the use of DPM in NAV and to the ambition of establishing metric knowledge, through measuring and counting, which can be used to plan and optimise the organisation in a rational manner. However, DPM does not only appear to have a measurement function. It is interesting that a rational, technical and instrumental tool like DPM can also be used to develop "smoother" dialogues between leaders and counsellors in NAV (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018; Schaefer & Lynch, 2015). A "smoother" dialogue means that leaders can use administrative statistics in their relational interaction with counsellors.

Traditional leadership research, such as transformational leadership and leader-member exchange, have an epistemological starting point, with a rational basis. At the same time, today's public sector is paradoxical and inconsistent. Many of the established theories are also superior and say little about leadership in practice. There seems to be a research gap here between today's leadership practice and the overall established theories. In this article, we try to elaborate NAV practices with a new epistemology to which symbolic rationality is central. The intention is to bridge the gap between superior theory and practice in NAV.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)

NAV consists of the former unemployment agency, social security agency and municipal social services in Norway. The municipalities and the state cooperate on finding solutions for

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clients through 456 NAV offices. NAV has around 19,000 employees, out of which around 14,000 are employed by the state, while around 5,000 are municipal employees. The agency manages one-third of the Norwegian state budget through arrangements such as unemployment benefit, sick pay, pension and financial assistance.

Method

This article is based on two empirical studies from the same research project at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in the south of Norway called "Leadership and client orientation in NAV". The research design led to the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews with follow-up questions to collect and analyse the opinions and experiences of the interviewees (Merriam, 2009). The interview guide covered the following aspects: Cognitive aspects: The interviewees' perceptions, understandings, inner logic, and descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. Emotional aspects: The interviewees' emotions and attitudes related to the phenomenon being studied. The interviewees' actions related to the phenomenon being studied. The aim of conducting the two empirical studies was to understand experiences, interactions and processes, whereby qualitative interviewing is suitable (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

A critical comment that can be made about the method is that the interviewees are perceived as being very conscientious and loyal to their employer. This may have affected their response.

Sample

The sample consists of 32 qualitative interviews. The interviewees were recruited through strategic selection based on two inclusion criteria: 1) being leaders and counsellors in NAV and 2) in the age range of 26-65 years. In the first study, 16 interviews were conducted with leaders; in the second study, 16 interviews were conducted with counsellors. The sample was recruited from both small and large NAV offices across the county.

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Transcription and analysis

The transcriptions of the interviews were in standard written language. The sum of the interviews consisted of 36 hours of audio recordings. In total, the transcribed interviews constitute 162 pages of text. The interviews were read thoroughly after transcription in an attempt to establish a holistic overview of the content (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The interviews were then reread to find key words and bits of information that were interesting and potentially important to answer the research questions. The tags and bits of information were noted in the margins of the transcribed interviews in a process called coding (Merriam, 2009). These codes were then systematised into groups in a process that Merriam (2009) calls analytical coding. This was an inductive process and the codes that belonged together then formed the main categories in the study, following a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All three researchers were involved in the manual coding, which ensured an unbiased analysis.

Ethics

All the participants were anonymised and treated confidentially. In connection with the notice regarding the interview, information about the study and a consent form were also sent to the interviewees. The interviewees were informed about what was to happen before each interview. The audio recordings from the interviews were locked in the project manager's office and stored on an external hard drive. The transcribed material was only read by the researchers. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the project "Leadership and client orientation in NAV" with project number 55412. In accordance with the approval, all audio recordings were deleted at the end of May 2019.

Results and analysis

Table 1 Main and underlying themes

Main theme 1	**Digital production management for control and dialogue**
Underlying theme	The symbolic power of digital production management
Underlying theme	Misuse of surveillance creates work overload
Underlying theme	Symbolic rationality of DPM entails surveillance and relations
Main theme 2	**Communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV**
Underlying theme	Combination of regulation and communication
Underlying theme	Enforcing rules and doing the best for the client
Underlying theme	Contradicting demands not conflicting
Main theme 3	**Contradictory simultaneous work demands**
Underlying theme	From administrative measurements to effects on the client
Underlying theme	Exchange role-making processes between leaders and counsellors
Underlying theme	Functional reciprocal relationships based on trust
Main theme 4	**The symbolic rationality of work in NAV**
Underlying theme	Symbolic rationality of NAV is summed up in the term work ethos
Underlying theme	The worldview shows the reality of NAV's social mandate, objective and functionality
Underlying theme	Symbolic rationality in NAV presents leaders' and counsellors' work situation

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Digital Production Management as a means of leadership control

In addition to DPM's technical and financial function of generating statistics about the work in NAV, it also has a symbolic power that can be used to develop the dialogue between leaders and counsellors in public agencies (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018). Several counsellors assert that DPM is an auxiliary tool, while they also clearly refer to its control aspect (Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). This may concern the leaders' monitoring of the counsellors in their work situations as well as managing the team. In NAV, the leader can also use meetings to supervise the team in practice, at both the group and individual level. According to the counsellors, this can lead to stress in the work situation if the leader's ability to monitor them leads to an increased workload beyond their normal working hours.

> It makes sense, but it does constitute an element of control at the same time. There is a risk of taking on extra work because I only have to do it this week so it doesn't appear in DPM when she comes in and checks.

> Yes, but there's not always that much discussion at the meetings; it's more a matter of concluding that last week we only dealt with "six things out of 50". Things are summarised (…). I miss more discussion about how to make the team function internally.

The above quotes show a fairly strong critique of the monitoring aspect relating to DPM. At the same time, the counsellors recognise the need for control and overview of the amount of cases both they and the leader take on. They believe that the leader requires a degree of monitoring in order for the team to function optimally. The critique concerns the fact that surveillance can easily be misused and creates a work overload. This is an example of how a technological tool such as DPM can function as a blueprint for the organisation of how to work in public agencies. DPM can thus be analysed as a cultural force field, or perhaps as a cultural container, in which many different types of factors in a society are addressed and expressed. DPM in NAV is a blueprint which entails aspects of surveillance and control (Power, 1999; Galic, Timan & Koops, 2017). Symbolic rationality related to DPM in NAV

means that leaders and counsellors are simultaneously aware of, and use, both the monitoring and relational aspects of the system.

Communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV

The interviewees describe counsellors who wish to help and do their best for clients, and those who are more concerned with enforcing the rules and not as interested in having working relationships with the clients (cf. Bjerge & Bjerregaard, 2017). At the same time, and according to the interviews, these apparent contradictions are not perceived as conflicting extremes because NAV needs a) counsellors who are able to communicate well with clients, and b) counsellors who have the ability to enforce a regulatory framework. The ideal counsellor is described as having personal qualities that combine both the communicative and regulative aspects of working. Although ideally, it would be possible to manage and measure production as well as communication and relationships with the clients, several of the interviewees expressed that relationships cannot be measured and that it is not meaningful to put numbers on the guidance of clients. Several counsellors express a work ethos of wishing to make a real life difference for the clients (Byrkjeflot, 2008; Lundqvist, 1998). This is not simply a matter of talking to the clients because their life situation is difficult, but also about taking time and recognising them as individuals. Symbolic rationality in NAV means that both counsellors and leaders combine communicative and regulative aspects of working.

> What I want in my office is counsellors who are just about in between. Who have the ability to enforce a regulatory framework, not with pleasure, but they do it at least, and who also have human characteristics and can communicate with clients. These are personal qualities that I look for which give me the opportunity to shape them, as I want.

> Listening to them (...) it's tough to not be at work; it's tough to be sick. It's not that hard to understand. I never think that you can measure everything. But they're measuring a lot, which is fine, but I don't think our job is fully measurable.

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Contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors

Leaders and counsellors use different rationalities to conceptualise their work situations in NAV (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018). Leaders have to focus on economic goals, while most of the counsellors want to do their best for the clients no matter what the cost. The interviewees describe a shift in NAV from quantity linked to finance and measurement of the total production, to quality and the results of their work with the individual client:

> We see a shift towards focusing more on quality. Initially, when NAV was established, there was a huge focus on quantity and counts. We now see a shift where we are being challenged on what results we achieve. Yes, finances and the numbers we have been measuring have gone well, and this has enabled us to focus more on quality and the quality of client meetings. Pulling the load together and good leadership are everything. The long speeches are so bureaucratic. I want to work efficiently, properly and smoothly, for our office.

In an ideal situation, leaders and counsellors should take into account both economic efficiency and client satisfaction. At the same time, optimising client satisfaction can affect strictly economic goals. These contradictory demands make the leaders' and counsellors' workday a stress field in which the ability to meet one requirement does negatively affect the possibility of fulfilling another (McGivern et al., 2015).

> There are huge expectations, both in terms of finance and savings, in professional results and in many other areas. So, there are ... I would say, expectations ... with a very wide breadth. We are expected to deliver equally on all fronts.

Another work demand referred to in the interviews is the ambition to develop a common NAV culture. The interviewees believe that the long-serving counsellors who experienced a sense of mastery in their former agencies find it challenging to relate to new work demands. 'It's one NAV. Not state and municipality. Some of the long-serving counsellors in a department said "we don't like that" and I then had to ask "who do you mean by we?"' This quote shows how NAV is developing new cultural patterns and how former organisational identity collides with a new and uniform identity.

> It seems strange that although it's years since the office was established, the long-serving counsellors are still obstinate in relation to some areas, which is not something we see in

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> the new counsellors. Nor has the management necessarily been instrumental in ensuring the cultures blend together, because the structures have been fairly separate, and structure has gone before culture. We try to merge the structures to change the culture.

The above quote shows the role-making processes between leaders and counsellors and the exchange relationship between them (Tummers & Knies, 2013). In NAV, counsellors from the former agencies influence the newly-hired counsellors, in what we call "horizontal dyads". In the vertical dyad, the leaders' attempts to have dialogue with both long-serving and newly-hired counsellors will differ in quality (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Functional relationships are characterised by mechanisms of reciprocity and social exchange, which become effective through mutual trust and counsellors' sense of being valued by their leaders (Tummers & Knies, 2013).

The symbolic rationality of work ethos and worldview in NAV

Symbolic rationality in NAV presents a coherent description of leaders' and counsellors' work situation (Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). Important parts of such a description are: the social, political, moral and ideological circumstances in which NAV operates. Another important aspect, according to the interviewees, consists of fulfilling its social mission by meeting and helping the client. It is not just about economic efficiency or reducing dependency on financial assistance as much as possible:

> I think that the social mission is safeguarded through individual conversations. Every single client is just as important. So, it's our vision to give people opportunities, and that is what we do every day through the client conversations. It helps to meet the social mission. The social mission is met through the meetings with the clients.

Another part of the description is financial and concerns the central function of DPM. NAV needs to clarify how measurements of counsellors' work with clients should be used and what role DPM should have in the organisation. The central assumption is that the number of parameters to be measured should be kept to a minimum, and that the results of the measurements should be used to investigate what direct effects the efforts have had on the

client, rather than using them to check the work of individual counsellors (Schaefer & Lynch, 2015):

> It is naturally the social benefit that is important. Whether we have 10 or 50 on a result sheet is not necessarily so important because it's the quality of the work performed that is crucial. What Vågeng has said is that there is far too much counting, and that we must switch to the effects of the measures. Balanced scorecards are fine, but we shouldn't have to measure too many indicators.

Another element of symbolic rationality in NAV concerns the character of leadership and the cultures of the three previous authorities on which NAV was "built". The formation of a coherent NAV culture provides the possibility to create meaningfulness in the work and greater job performance (Dulebohn et al., 2012). The interviewees describe how many former managers were preoccupied with measurements and goal management and that they almost ignored the relational aspect of leadership. This is an example of transactional leadership (Burns, 1978; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). The interviewees ask for more transformational leadership, where they are involved in decision-making, and where dialogue with their leaders underpins the sense of meaning and mastery in relation to their job (Bass and Avolio, 1990a; Tummers & Knies, 2013). According to the interviewees, the current leadership strategies in NAV focus on financial aspects and use DPM to measure work efforts, while also developing the relational dialogue with the counsellors:

> What leadership is in NAV? That's a difficult question because there are many ways to talk about leadership. I think there's a link to the three previous cultures that make up NAV. I don't think that at the top level we have properly become NAV either. I think the county director has played a role in how leadership is exercised in the different counties, and I don't know for sure, but different counties have developed differently based on the type of county director they have, and which previous agency they came from. We had a leader from the previous social security agency who focused a lot on goals and results, and very little on other stuff.

The symbolic rationality of NAV's activities also encompasses a national cultural element that does not have to be taken into account in the other Nordic welfare systems. For example, in Sweden over the past 30 years, the focus and volume of the production of welfare services

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have been centralised under national political control (Lundquist, 1998). Centralisation has led to the alignment of, for example, the Social Insurance Office and the Employment Service. Norway has a very strong municipal political mandate, which gives the welfare system a considerable decision-making mandate and a great scope of action at the local level. This means that a balance must be struck in the management of NAV between the central state level and the local municipal level. This is an example of hybrid professionalism of leaders and organisational logics in mixed structures (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018, p. 30). This has enabled the various municipalities to focus on parts of "their" NAV:

> The expectations of me as a leader in NAV are a challenge because we have two management lines, and two different sets of expectations, from my counsellor in the municipality and my director in the county. This in itself is a suboptimal solution, but there are differences between my powers of authority on the municipal and state side. I have more professional influence on the municipal side than on the state side. Fortunately, this is resolved to some extent on the state side, but there is still a lot of goal management, while I set my goals myself to a much greater extent on the municipal side. There are two different budgets and two different bosses. It's a partnership where we meet annually and talk together, so we find out. It isn't a problem.

The symbolic rationality of NAV consists of organisational, moral and evaluative aspects, which can be summed up in the term work ethos. The work ethos consists of the tone, quality and character of the counsellors' and leaders' behaviour in the everyday work of NAV. The tone expresses the leaders' and counsellors' solidarity with and commitment to the client's situation. The quality and character of the NAV work ethos empower and guide clients through the system. In NAV, another work ethos consists of the deeper job satisfaction attained by helping clients to achieve a better everyday life (Byrkjeflot, 2008; Lundqvist, 1998).

> I started working to make a difference for people, without necessarily solving every problem they have. And it's not like I've got time to sit and talk to someone just because they're sad, that's not what I mean, but it's a matter of actually taking the time to talk to them.

The worldview, strongly related to work ethos, shows the reality of NAV's social mandate, objective and functionality. The social mandate means that Norway deems it important to

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finance and run a welfare system for its inhabitants. The objective and functionality include more people in work and activity, fewer receiving financial assistance, a well-functioning labour market, good services adapted to the client's requirements, as well as a wholesome and effective work and welfare management. This is symbolic rationality expressed through a set of coherent ideas about NAV's activities and their consistency, and the sequence in which they are performed (Geertz, 1973). In an organisational theory context, NAV is not just a technically neutral bureaucracy; rather, it includes the counsellors' and leaders' work ethos (cf. Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018).

Summary

Systems of value-laden symbols in NAV synthesise leaders' and counsellors' ways of performing their work based on their perception of the fundamental nature of the organisation (Tummers & Knies, 2013; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). An example is the traditional perception of NAV as a bureaucratic and strictly production-oriented authority based on economic rationality, in which both leaders and counsellors behave in a calculated and rule-governed way towards the client (Brodkin, 2008). This study presents an organisational cultural pattern that challenges the bureaucratic and economic one (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018). The pattern concerns both strictly economic matters focusing on numbers, and more relational and emotional aspects linked to the client (Ellingsen, Eriksson & Røn, 2018). Leaders and counsellors in NAV use the symbols as resources to communicate their ambitions, define goals, coordinate work and develop a collective identity. However, cultural symbols often carry multiple and sometimes conflicting messages (Hatch, 2018). Leaders and employees in NAV have to combine competencies, practices and values, and, at the same time, focus on both professional interests and organisational goals (Breit, Fossestøl & Alm Andreassen, 2018; Carvalho 2014; Blomgren & Waks 2015). The leader must measure the counsellors' work performance and manage the direction and quality of the work (Bovens & Stavros, 2002). At

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the same time, the leader must protect democracy in the workplace through dialogue with the counsellor (Edmondson, 2019). The leader should also strive for economic efficiency, meet clients' needs, have optimal administration and establish peace to work within and between different professions working in the business (McGivern et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to describe work relations between leaders and counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The study focuses on communication, control, work ethos, worldview and Digital Production Management. It presents the concept of symbolic rationality in an attempt to characterise relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV. The study attempts to answer the following research question: How are relations between leaders and counsellors in NAV affected by symbolic rationalities in the intersection between economic, administrative and client-oriented work tasks? The study found the following: (a) that leaders use DPM to control employees, (b) communicative and regulative aspects of working in NAV, (c) contradictory simultaneous work demands on leaders and counsellors, and (d) the symbolic rationality of work in NAV. The aspects (a) to (d) show a specific worldview in NAV.

The study also found aspects of work ethos in NAV, such as a strong will to help and do the best for the client, and at the same time meet NAV's financial and administrative requirements (Lundquist, 1998; Byrkjeflot, 2008). It is fruitful to describe this situation using the concept of symbolic rationality. What, then, is symbolic rationality in the public sector? At a more abstract level, symbolic rationality is a system of symbols with interacting meanings, which are historically constructed, socially maintained and individually applied (Goodsell, 1977; Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017). At a more tangible level, the study concludes that both leaders and counsellors face paradoxical demands. The requirements include simultaneously achieving economic efficiency, digital administration and control, positive effects for the

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client and professional satisfaction. These demands have a negative effect on each other. If one requirement is achieved, it will often have a negative effect on another. This organisational logic needs a reciprocal working relationship between leaders and counsellors. Reciprocity in this context means that leaders and counsellors need mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other's responsibilities and duties. The dynamic nominalism of these simultaneous contradictory demands is at the heart of symbolic rationality in the public sector.

Another conclusion is linked to counsellors in NAV, and, by categorising their work performance as counsellorship, the study indicates aspects that can contribute to reframe the way in which counsellors conduct their work. First, counsellorship can be about meeting the client with respect and recognition. Secondly, it can be about interacting with colleagues and leaders in the same way. Counsellorship is thus close to leadership, which, in short, means that dialogue, recognition and transparency are key values in the reciprocal function of both roles.

Through symbolic rationality, the study has identified the possibility of further research on the hybrid professionalism of leadership and counsellorship, at three levels in the ambidextrous public sector. The first is the epistemological level, where the concept sets limits on how a social situation such as NAV can be spoken about and understood. A second level is the theoretical level, where categories and logics can be formed that are seen as being applicable to work in NAV. The third and final level is the practical level, where the concept of symbolic rationality and the meanings connected with it shape leaders' and counsellors' professional practice in the public sector. This practice benefits from symbolic rationality to manage complexity and ambiguity at work.

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