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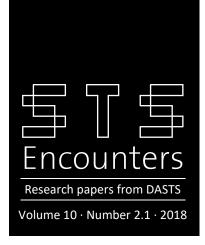
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# Encounters between social work and STS

Lars Bo Andersen & Rasmus Hoffmann Birk

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This special issue was motivated by a series of productive 'encounters' between a diverse group of researchers and practitioners working in and between the fields of social work and STS - most notably the 'Introducing STS and Social Work' sessions at the Danish STS conference in 2016.

There has only been limited engagement between STS and social work in the past, especially if compared to the intimate relationship between STS and healthcare or the historical and actual connections between social work and sociology. While a lack of dialogue is not necessarily a problem in itself, we would argue that there is potential for increased collaboration between social work and STS, for at least two reasons:

First, for the reason that STS and social work are both interested in exploring what we could call 'alternative collectives'. Researchers and practitioners from both fields are approaching the world and its inhabitants as dynamic and unfolding phenomena, which could, or should, be engaged and intervened with - either directly or more conceptually - in order to learn how they could become otherwise. We see this, for instance, in efforts to democratize hybrid collectives in STS (e.g. Zuiderent-Jerak Teun, 2015) and within social work in the prominence of participatory approaches to research *with* practitioners and service users (e.g. Julkunen & Uggerhøj, 2016).

Furthermore, in both fields we find the idea that collectives are inhabited by more than just human bodies. The idea is more orthodox in STS, but social work research is not blind to the knowledge, infrastructure, methods, organizations, cars and computers, which mediate our existence and practices. For instance, Ferguson has illustrated how the proliferation of the car transformed British practices of social work from the 1950s onwards (2008). The car became central both

to carrying out home visits within social work, and thus also changed conceptions of what social work practice *should be* and what social work, as a practice, could be expected to *do* in terms of safeguarding children (Ferguson, 2008, 2010).

There are also important differences between STS and social work. Most obviously, it would be easy to stir some polemics around the word 'social' or the status of 'humans' in the collectives we inhabit (e.g. Latour, 2005). But in our Deleuzian understanding of an 'encounter', the ambition is not to settle these potential disputes (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006). Instead, our ambition is to bring together differences in order to create something new between them which is premised by neither one. As such, the three articles bring together elements from both fields to say something new and interesting about rehabilitation through wash toilets; case management through video screens and data production in municipalities.

The second reason why STS and social work should engage each other is made evident when reading this special issue. In each their own way, the articles demonstrate how social work is currently experiencing a substantial influx of new regimes of science and technology. These include assistive technologies meant to create new types of self-reliant subjects; new forms of digitization meant to enable 'data-driven' practices and organizations; new forms of digital mediation of social work; and the continued proliferation of 'evidence based' science.

In the first article, Matilde Høybye-Mortensen and Peter Ejbye-Ernst follow the long and complex 'cooking' of data meant to govern social work practices. Their article provides important insights about what it means to work with data. They not only illustrate that data are constructed in a complex interplay of man and machine rather than collected as raw material. They also show that digital case management systems fail to appreciate the constructedness of data when they render code and calculations invisible to administrative staff

who need to actively participate in- and validate the construction process. Thus, the authors show us how the old system of 'open source' spreadsheets, while simpler, in some ways worked better.

The second article by Lars Bo Andersen, Peter Danholt and Peter Lauritsen investigates what happens to the relationship between placed children and their public case managers when they begin chatting, texting and 'skyping' each other. The use of these technologies often creates fear of professional alienation and increased 'distance' to citizens. But in the case described, the technologies facilitated situations of intimacy-with-distance where, for instance, children could feel close enough to case managers to tell them something difficult yet distant enough to be shielded from their immediate reactions. Another important argument of the article is that digital technologies may work for social work, so to speak, even when they do not work well in the technical sense. The shared 'challenge' of working with difficult technologies may, for instance, be rather productive for building trust and getting closer to children if organized as a shared research process.

The third article by Anne Marie Dahler, Lis Holm Petersen and Pernille Tanggaard Andersen analyzes the roles, expectations and normativities inscribed into assistive technologies. The article illustrates the different and often contrasting expectations build into a 'wash toilet', which is supposed to render elderly citizens independent of care work when using the toilet or, conversely, to make caring for them less strenuous for nurses. The article offers both an illustrative account of the numerous difficulties involved in getting a toilet to work as intended and—on a more conceptual level—a post-humanist argument that to be independent implies, in fact, a substantial socio-technical dependence.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue forefront the intellectual productivity of thinking social work and STS together. It is our hope that the special issue may serve as inspiration for both social work researchers and STS scholars, and that it may inspire further encounters between these fields.

In a final remark, we would like to express our appreciation to everyone who contributed to the various encounters between STS and social work but did not get their name on this special issue: those who presented papers, drafted articles and served as reviewers - their participation in the dialogue was substantive and much appreciated. We would also like to thank Louise Nørgaard Glud for her work and her contributions in forming this special issue.

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## Biographical note

Lars Bo Andersen, PhD, is a postdoc at Information Studies at Aarhus University. Lars is researching how technologies are used to affect power, politics and identities in processes of social change.

Rasmus Hoffmann Birk, PhD, is a research assistant at the Department of Communication & Psychology at Aalborg University. Rasmus' research focuses, amongst other things, on marginalization and the urban, on mental illness and subjectivity, and he draws on STS to understand these areas.