Journal of Organizational Ethnography

Inside the Black Box of Public Service Change

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Editorial

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In 2015, the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* published a Special Issue: Excursions in Administrative Ethnography. The papers collected here are partly a follow-on and partly an echo of that Special Issue. We present these as academics engaged and interested in those aspects of social and organizational life that are public and social. And we do so as collaborators in both that first Special Issue and as participants in subsequent seminars and workshops exploring these themes. However, while that 2015 Special Issue sought to make the case for the value of ethnographic work in political and administrative sciences, to argue for a methodological adventure, this collection perhaps blurs the lines between public, social and private. We collect together papers that explore the ways in which public services are changing, or being changed. But we do so as two who have a commitment to understanding the nature of public and social interventions. We are not passive observers of a phenomenon. We are engaged.

Our commitment and interest is well illustrated in the work of Jan Banning (2008), a Dutch photographer. He has taken images of 'bureaucrats' at their desks and presents them as a single collection. We might imagine Sir Humphrey Appleby or Thomas Gradgrind. But the collection also presents the variety of what is described as bureaucratic, as uniform. Civil servants appear to work in front rooms, attics and under tropical fronds. Police officers work behind computer screens and with chalk boards. Archivists take pride in their environment while some local government offices are more chaotic. Tax collectors appear unthreatening. The people staring back at the camera are individuals, each presenting an image of legitimacy to the camera, to the viewer. Prominent among these symbols of legitimacy are uniforms, name plates and certificates, but we might also suggest desks and paper files as symbols of authority. And behind the desks, on the walls, are images of political figures in polities where democratic values are perhaps less predominant.

That is to say that the public sector is variegated, and always has been. Bureaucracy has never been uniform or 'one size fits all'. It has always been pervaded by discretion (Lipsky, 1980). And in this context of variety, we collect five papers that talk of change. The changes are different, but each, in some way, seeks to constrain or direct the ways in which public servants, those individuals photographed by Jan Banning, exercise their discretion. So far from bureaucratic, the fact that efforts have to be made to direct and constrain these individuals suggests they are not the cogs in the machine that we might assume. Indeed, these are the rogue elements that are the focus of such disciplines as health improvement science, a 'science' that seeks to minimize the implementation failings of humans (Shojania and Grimshaw, 2005; Berwick, 2008; Lobb and Colditz, 2013; Nilsen et al, 2013). This discipline seeks to conduct trials to understand how best to implement change, how best to actively and positively incorporate the local structural conditions, organizational dynamics and the voices of people working in health care organizations. In contrast to such a perspective, we collect together papers that approach the problem of change and implementation the other way around. That is, we investigate the frameworks, experiences, reflections and reasonings of the individuals working in organizations, not in order to improve or correct certain behavior, but to explore and better understand what actually goes on in the "black box" of bureaucracy (Mosse 2004), and why this may or may not make sense to the individuals populating this box.

Further, the articles in this Special Issue can also be said to supplement the still photos of Jan Banning´s bureaucrats. Although these photos display a diversity of employees, they are all photos of persons who sit still behind their desk in an office. In contrast, the individuals in the articles collected here illustrate employees in motion, whether they are physically engaged with teaching vulnerable pupils or they are engaged in strategic planning and ways to "brand" their organization. That is, the articles present employees on the fly, on the move, as they try to make sense of the structural set-up of their organization and the expectations of the people they engage with on a day-to-day basis. This vibrant aspect has always been part of the daily routines of most bureaucrats, but is also enhanced by increasing societal demands for institutions and their employees to change, develop and adapt. Actually, considering the present rate of reform in contemporary society, it is reasonable to say that legislative change and organizational reconfiguration have turned into a permanent condition for many organizations (Smith & Lewis 2011). Yet little has been written about how employees learn about the role and the practices of employees when confronted with new acts, legislation and programs (Hill 2003; Rowe 2006). How do they navigate the various demands made of them and deliver their services within the framework of public organizations characterized by such perpetual change (Jarzabsowski 2016; Bjerge 2012; Smith & Lewis 2011; Tsoukas & Chia 2002)?

Despite the fact that ethnographers - much like photographers - are only present in an organization at a given period of time, the ethnographic gaze has something to offer. We will often try to communicate the dynamic and productive dimensions of peoples´ experiences and actions by combining observed examples, cases and theories, as well as informal talk and interviews with informants, to grasp their reflections on experiences, on strategies and on what is important from their perspective. Further, ethnographic research methods are well suited to examining both organizational contingencies and the processes through which micro-actions relate to, feed into and, ultimately, transform macro-level structures. In other words, we study how reform and change happens in practice (see also Douglas 1986, Jarzabsowski 2016).

We noted, at the outset, that these papers are part of a continuing project. In 2015, an interdisciplinary network on Ethnographic Research into Public Sector Reform was established. The network is funded by the Danish Council for Independent Reseach and aims to establish a shared and authoritative research agenda across the European welfare states. The network brings to the fore the organizational instability arising from change and examines and theorises the shared and country-specific ways in which the pace of reform influences the work life and service delivery of public employees. In the period of funding, we will organize three PhD workshops, four thematic writing workshops focusing on different public service fields and an international conference in the Spring of 2018. Two PhD workshops are in collaboration with the annual Ethnography Symposium, at the University of the West of England in 2016 and at the University of Manchester in 2017. A further one will be held alongside the conference in the Spring of 2018. The series of writing workshops and the 2018 conference are being held at University of Aarhus. The first of the four workshops (December 2015) focused on reform in the public sector from a more general perspective, including papers on refugees, schools and Lean systems in social work. The second thematic workshop (March 2017) focused specifically on policing research, including papers on administrative changes, new forms of plural policing and the development of new police practices, methods and instruments. The third workshop (November 2017) will focus on the imbrications and interstices between welfare service organizations managing citizens in need of services that cross different sectors, institutions and disciplines. And, finally, the fourth workshop will focus on the idea of a basic income (dates to

be announced). At the conference in Spring 2018 (dates to be announced), we will focus on: how to condense the research results of the network; how to develop administrative ethnography to influence advice to government on reform; and, with our shared interest in ethnographic methods and an interpretative approach, we will discuss the contribution from the humanities in addressing the present and future of the welfare state.

In this Special Issue we present some of the work emerging from this programme of work, taking for granted that the value of ethnography in public administration has been established by the first Special Issue in 2015. The articles gathered in the 2017 Special Issue show that reforms and intended change never seem to be implemented on a simple, smooth and linear basis. In practice, they are often transformed into something rather different. This is not new knowledge within organizational studies (Lipsky, 1980; Moore, 1978; Meyer & Rowan, 1997; Brunsson & Olsson, 1997; Flyvbjerg, 1996). You might even want to call it a self-evident, banal point but, nonetheless, it is a point that is worth repeating as this kind of knowledge has a tendency to evaporate in many types of management and organizational literature and amongst reform policy planners (we have already noted the emergence of health improvement science). This is not to write off reform policies as the "hubris of planners" (Scott, 1998: 247), which is an often raised critique that politicians and policy wonks are decoupled from practices when writing policies, laws, strategies, reforms and regulations for unemployment services, schools, or city and business planning, for example. Rather, discrepancies can be regarded as the (inevitable) result of encounters between complex social realities and simplified policies produced to accommodate political requirements for consensus and a "theoretical 'state of the art'" (Mosse, 2007: 460). However, our aspiration with this collection of ethnographic studies of and perspectives on the everyday life of organizations in a state of constant change is to contribute to at least the scientific state of the art, so that sciences will remain open to and respect the experiences and perspectives of the various forms of bureaucrats working in these organizations.

Both Jakob Krause-Jensen and Renita Thedvell focus on attempts to foster change via the concept of *Lean*. Lean is a business philosophy inspired by the production system of Toyota which worked to engage the workforce in solving problems and developing the efficiency of production tasks. Based on fixed and mechanical processes on the assembly line, it was adapted in the mid 1990´s to fit both public and private sector management practices in service industries and beyond. As a means to implement change and increase cost effectiveness, Lean has been (and to some degree still is) highly fashionable in the recent past, particularly in the health service in the UK and in the Nordic countries.

Taking its´ empirical point of departure in research conducted amongst Danish family counselors, Krause-Jensen´s article shows how Lean was introduced as a management concept eliminating 'waste' through worker participation, empowerment and enthusiasm. However, despite its´ promising prospects, the concepts and tools of Lean were not well received by social workers. Rather, it is met with skepticism and experienced as a 'waste of time'. Why? To answer that, the author draws on anthropological theories on symbol and ritual, analyzing how on the one hand Lean has been established as a commonsensical way to foster change and efficiency at a political and managerial level. On the other hand, one of the key findings of the analysis is that the language of Lean forces social workers to look at their stressful daily practices and extremely heavy caseloads in ways that tend to suppress and marginalize negative experiences and delegitimize particular

viewpoints and forms of critique. Such experiences are brushed aside by the Lean consultants and managers as showing a lack of knowledge or commitment. In that sense, it is difficult to align actual possibilities in practice to the persuasive, linear and idealized processes described in Lean. Perhaps not so surprising, in a recent follow-up on the Lean process, Krause-Jensen discovers that Lean never really seemed to gain a footing amongst those social workers he observed. Rather, what has actually changed the working conditions in a positive sense since the attempts to implement Lean is the employment of more social workers and a reduction in the number of case files carried by each social worker!

Based on her first hand experiences of a Lean coaching training course for public care employees in a Swedish municipality, Renita Thedvall explores what it is about the Lean philosophy that seems so appealing to some public sector employees. Drawing on theories of affective atmospheres, charisma and a societal wish for "smoothing" its´ "machines", combined with detailed descriptions of exercises and reflections on the course, the article demonstrates how Lean consultants manage to imbue more rational organizations with hope for a better future. In doing so, they use positive language and remarkable abilities to create an atmosphere of enthusiasm and attraction, an important part of generating support for the concept in the municipality. It becomes evident that the production of such an atmosphere requires a lot of work from the consultants. For example, they are eager to create "aha-moments" and leave the participants little time to reflect but to merely focus on the practical tasks, "making participants" see the usefulness of Lean and promising "smoothness and flow" within routine services. This production is so persuasive that even skeptical participants, such as Thedvall herself, give in and for a moment, in the heat of the training course, forget about the practical implications of how such ideas might work in the crowded offices, classrooms and emergency rooms of the public sector. In that sense, the article demonstrates some of the local as well as societal social dynamics of why the idea of change is so appealing in contemporary society.

While these first two articles suggest that externally driven change is adapted at best or resisted at worst, Bagga Bjerge and Toke Bjerregaard seek to paint a more nuanced picture. As the ideas of the New Public Management and, more recently, of entrepreneurialism have become commonplace in the public services, we are used to stories of the failings of these initiatives, their inappropriateness and so forth. Bjerge and Bjerregaard suggest that, in the two service areas they are concerned with (drug and alcohol treatment, and city and business development), they find a more differentiated picture. For some, change is necessary, even desireable. As monopoly providers, they need to be able to demonstrate value and to 'sell' their services. But these positive notes are undermined by the continuing influence of bureaucratic forms of control and of political systems of decision making that emphasize different values. Operating in an environment that they depict as dimly lit, shaded and overshadowed, public servants find themselves in a twilight zone, a land of 'both shadow and substance'.

Raising further questions about the nature of public services and of change, Louise Christensen offers four instances of change in services working with marginalized people affected by multiple and complex social, physical and psychological problems. Change and accompanying uncertainty are everyday features of working life. Policy changes, organizational restructuring and local initiatives operate at different levels (national, regional, local) and pull on different levers of change (legal, procedural, professional). Where once we might have thought of a service operating similarly across

a national territory, we now find variation, difference and adaptation. This might suggest that there is no service, indeed no profession of social work. If it is so vulnerable to change and so different from one place to the next, social work ceases to have any meaning as a concept. But, on the contrary, Christensen argues that, in their daily practices, she sees social work practices that share common concerns and principles. Through close observation of the practices of social workers, she suggests they navigate a constantly changing environment, plotting their own course and pursuing it in the face of gales and currents that are often working against their objectives.

Moving away from Scandinavia, Lila le Trividic Harrache presents a very different article, in style if not in interest. It is the story of the development of a research interest. But it is also a story of a change in policy in French schools as the category of 'mental suffering' began to be used to individualize responsibility for educational shortcomings. At least, this was the initial focus of the research. How would different professionals use categories drawn from mental health disciplines? As the research developed, she realized that she was 'reifying' the category she set out to deconstruct, treating at as having a meaning in the field. After some reflection, turmoil and chaos, le Trividic Harrache focused on what was being said, how terms were being used and paying attention to those themes that sparked her curiosity. Instead of the use of mental health categories, her research turned to consider the ways in which personal information about pupils is gathered, how it is used and how it is shared or kept confidential. Understanding the categories in use by professionals has led to the reformulation of the research focus. Much like Bjerge and Bjerregaard, and like Christensen, rather than assume and reify policies and categories, the close observation of the working practices of public services professionals reveals some surprising worlds.

This surprise, the uncovering of the interesting and the unexpected, is an essential contribution of ethnographic work to our understanding of reforms in the public services. As the work of the network established by Aarhus University develops in the coming year, we look forward to more.

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