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Introduction¹

This issue contains nine fascinating articles that reflect on central issues in contemporary working life in the Nordic countries. The articles deal with empirical issues in relation to gender, work life quality, professionalization, unions, organizational intervention, industrial relations, and the authors adopt different theoretical and methodological frameworks in their research. Let me briefly sketch the themes of the studies brought in this issue.

In the first article of this issue ‘The Interplay of Sensemaking and Material Artefacts during Interventions: A Case Study’, Johan Simonsen Abildgaard and Karina Nilsen reflect on work interventions in organizations. Through a case study focusing on two organizational units in the Danish postal service, the authors demonstrate how processes of sense making, construed in a Weickian theoretical framework, and materiality, conceived in an actor-network theoretical perspective, mutually interact to affect participants’ efforts to implement the organizational intervention and eventually affect the psychosocial work-environment.

In ‘Why do Young People Give up Their Job Search?’, Sami Ylistö investigates the strategies young Finnish people enact for terminating job search. His empirical material is comprised of life course interviews with long-term unemployed young Finns, and the material vindicates that giving up search for jobs is a complex phenomenon that can only be understood by paying attention to the prospects and worthwhileness of looking for jobs and the rational, emotional, and value choices in relation to job content that the job seekers hold. Ylistö argues that the strategies of the long-term unemployed cannot be explained by linking the phenomenon to a lack of work ethics. The adopted strategies must rather be understood in the individuals’ relation to a strained labor market situation.

The article ‘Hiring of Flexible and Fixed-term Workers in Five Norwegian and Swedish Industries’ authored by Jørgen Svalund, Anna Peixoto, Jon Erik Dølvik, and Kristin Jesnes compares the willingness and motives of Norwegian and Swedish employers in labor-intensive industries to hire workers on different forms of contracts. This comparison considers how the industries and labor market are regulated in the two countries, and the analysis shows that the employers use of fixed-term employment is dependent on their ability to find and engage with alternative sources of flexible labor. But the preferences are also dependent on the employers’ normative recognition of permanent employment as the ‘right’ way of organizing.

John-Paul Byrne sets out to examine why Denmark has an exceptional high score in measurements of work life quality. His contribution to this issue ‘Denmark, Durkheim, and Decentralisation: The Structures and Capabilities of Danish Working Lives’ pursues this question through 40 interviews with Danish labor market experts, and

¹ You can find this text and its DOI at <https://tidsskrift.dk/njwls/index>.



a Durkheimian theoretical framework that highlights the ‘decentralized intermediary organs’ that provides regulation, integration, and solidarity to connect citizens and state. Byrne points to the Danish system of collective agreements as an essential component for the provision of organic solidarity, legitimate regulation, and capabilities to enable work life balance and control. He does, however, detect growing cracks in the model, as economic competitiveness has led to increasing deregulation.

Johan Alvehus and Thomas Andersson are puzzled by apparently incompatible observations made in the literature on the development of welfare professions in health care and teaching. The literature reports tendencies of loss of professional autonomy, hybridization, and maintained autonomy. In ‘A New Professional Landscape: Entangled Institutional Logics in Two Swedish Welfare Professions’, Alvehus and Andersson discuss how to make sense of this paradoxical situation. By invoking institutional theory, they suggest that the findings can be explained by pointing to the fact that institutionalization is always situated and local and must be understood in its concrete empirical context. This implies that contradictory processes can coexist, as processes of institutional decentralization-centralization-decentralization supply an appropriate scope for the occurrence of multiple and entangled processes of professional development.

The study presented by Mattias Bengtsson and Patrik Vulkan in ‘After the Great Recession: Unions’ Views on Transnational Interests and Cooperation’ examines unions’ views on transnational union interests and corporation in Europe. They examine the empirical material from a questionnaire survey conducted among European union officials about their attitudes toward transnational union initiatives and corporation after the economic recession. Their findings indicate a stronger transnational orientation among unions from the Southern and Eastern European countries, whereas unions in the Scandinavian and Western parts of Europe are less prone to embrace a transnational perspective. The authors explain this cleavage by reference to the different industrial relations regimes that has evolved in these regions over time.

Minna Leinonen, Risto Nikkanen, and Katri Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta look at the organizational processes that are affected by downsizing in the Finnish Defence Forces. In ‘Organizational Change and Employee Concerns in the Finnish Defence Forces’, the authors examine how organizational transformations due to budget cuts impinge differently on groups of employees in the organization. Data from a survey among the personnel show that gender, age, and personnel group status tend to intersect in exposing individual employees in the organizational transformation. The analysis thus makes it clear that gender hierarchies and divides between civilians and military employees are increased.

Mari Teigen and Ragni Hege Kitterød discuss gender equality in top management in ‘Bringing Managers Back In: Support for Gender-Equality Measures in the Business Sector’. On the basis of a survey among top managers in the 200 biggest Norwegian companies, they investigate what kind of policies top managers prioritize to stimulate gender balance in executive ranks. Their research shows that both men and women in top management rank different gender equality measures in roughly similar ways, although women in general tend to support all measures more strongly. Among eight

different types of measures, men and women are most in favor of active recruitment policies, and they favor preferential treatment of women the least. The authors argue that knowledge about top management preferences for gender equality measures is of importance in order to make the policy measures effective.

Statutory rights to reduce work hours have been promoted as a policy measure in welfare states to raise the female labor force and to better the career-family balance in families with small children. But do these policy measures have a side effect of increasing gender inequality? In 'Beyond the Mummy Track? Part-time Rights, Gender, and Career-Family Dilemmas', Anne Grönlund and Ida Öun discuss this question. Through a survey among Swedish parents, they investigate how the parents use their rights for work reduction and how this is experienced by the parents. Grönlund and Öun find that the gender composition of the workplaces affects the parents' likelihood to use their rights, and that workplace norms and men's participation in housework are pivotal for making the policy measure effective as an instrument for gender equality.

Enjoy!

Anders Buch