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# Policy and identity change in youth social work: From social-interventionist to neoliberal policy paradigms

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## Abstract

- *Summary:* This article analyses – by drawing on ideology critical and psychoanalytical concepts from Slavoj Žižek and Glynos et al. – how political, social and fantasmatic logics interplay and form social workers' professional identities within two youth social work institutions that operate within different social policy paradigms: a social-interventionist paradigm in 2002 and a neoliberal paradigm in 2010.
- *Findings:* The article shows how the current neoliberalisation of public policy permeates social work practices through fantasmatic narratives that create professional identities to heal discrepancies in and conceal the political dimension of everyday life. In one institution, within a welfare state-based ideology a compensating-including social professional identity is created in response to the young people's alleged deficiencies; in the other institution, within a neoliberal ideology a mobilising-motivating identity is created to meet the young people's alleged excess. In both narratives, however, the young people risk bearing the blame for the failure of the social professional project.
- *Applications:* Fantasies in both institutions conceal how social workers' professional identities sustain dominant ideology through dislocating uncertainties, ambiguities and ambivalences implicated in professional social work. Whether rooted in the state-based welfare or market-oriented neoliberal policy paradigms, realisation of these dynamics may expose the basic interdependencies of state, civil society and market actors implicated in the project of professional social work.

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**Introduction**

Although the constitution and development of professional identities within the social professions is disputed (Eriksson, 2014; Etsioni, 1969; Ferguson, 2011; Leigh, 2013; Lorenz, 2008; Payne, 2006; Tice, 1998; Toren, 1972; Suefferey, 2011), it is commonly acknowledged that a distinctive close relationship exists between social professional identities and social policy, as Lorenz (2008) argues:

The social professions are particularly susceptible to social policy influences, which, while not determining the shape and direction of training, create a context that is often regarded as constraining but that, in reality, represents an inalienable part of the identity-shaping and purpose-defining process of this profession. (Lorenz, 2008, p. 626)

In this article, I explore how developments in Danish social politics (following international trends) have changed social professional understandings, practices and – ultimately – identities by juxtaposing two youth programmes, the Hinterland (henceforth HL), which targets ‘association-less’ ethnic minority boys, and Girls’ Community (henceforth GC), which targets ‘wild girls’ (Vitus, 2012, 2013b). The programmes were studied in 2002 and 2010, respectively, and, I argue, were conditioned by shifting policy paradigms from modernistic social interventionism reflecting traditional Danish welfare state ideology, to the post-modernistic neoliberalism that has increasingly been shaping Danish public policy to date. These paradigms create different ideological conditions for social work professionals’ definition and realisation of social problems, tasks, solutions, and client and social worker identities.

Professional identities and workplace practices are often, as in HL and GC, articulated through narratives (Glynos, 2008; Leigh, 2013). To identify in HL’s and GC’s narratives the interplay among political conditions, social practices and professional identity constructions, I apply ideology-critical and Lacanian psychoanalytical perspectives, drawing on Slavoj Žižek (1989, 1991, 1997) and Janos Glynos and David Howarth (Glynos, 2008, 2014; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Žižek conceptualises reality as constituted of three inevitably interrelated, but incommensurable, orders: symbolic, real and imaginary, which, when operating together, make the social world appear coherent. Ideology functions through the production of fantasies that make a paradoxical (professional social work) reality appear healed and overcome. Based on Lacanian psychoanalysis (drawing on Žižek, but also Heidegger, Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault,

Wittgenstein and Derrida), Glynos and Howarth (2007) developed an analytic of 'logics of critical explanation' suited to critically engaging how changing political conditions institute new social practices, such as those in HL and GC, and how such logics are sustained and legitimised through fantasies. This analysis is achieved by examining the interplay among political, social and fantasmatic 'logics'. An examination of how professional identity fantasies make practices become possible, intelligible and vulnerable sheds light not only on how political changes transform social practices (such as those in HL and GC) and why such practices 'grip' subjects (cf. Glynos, 2008, p. 278), but also on how fantasmatic logics serve to conceal the political implication of social professional identities and practices (Howarth, 2010, p. 322). In this way the analysis taps into critical studies of fantasies as being factors which form organisations, maintain and potentially transform workplace practices (e.g. Fotaki et al., 2012; Gabriel, 1995, 1997; Glynos, 2008; Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008; Walkerdine, 2005, 2006), and also enable the invisible intrusion of market logics to new areas such as health and social care (Fotaki, 2010; Glynos, 2014).

I first present the general shift from a state-based social-interventionist policy paradigm to a market-oriented neoliberal policy paradigm in Denmark, which changes professional identities and client relations. Second, the HL and GC are briefly described along with the methods applied in studying these settings. Third, I discuss the relationship among narratives, logics and fantasies from a psychoanalytical perspective. Fourth, the dynamics of political, social and fantasmatic logics in the two programmes are explored through narratives about the young people and workplace practices. Last, I summarise major analytical conclusions and discuss the purpose they may serve in the field of professional social work.

### *Background: Developments in welfare state political logics*

In Denmark, as well as internationally, a shift is currently taking place in welfare state ideology and more specifically in the neoliberalisation of public sector responsibilities and activities. In the 20th century, Danish social policy was formulated within what I call a 'social-interventionist paradigm' (Vitus, 2013b) dominated by social democratic values (Lorenz, 2008, p. 629) that sustained what Jock Young (1999) characterises as 'the inclusive society'. In this paradigm the welfare state provides universal social services in a both interventionist (to obtain social justice and equality through social and economic policy) and assimilative manner (aimed at social deviants on margins of society) through an apparatus of experts 'skilled in the use of therapeutic language of social work, of counselling, of clinical psychology and allied positivistic disciplines' (Young, 1999, p. 5). This traditional welfare state ideal assigns the state a moral and political responsibility for citizens 'from the cradle to the grave' in securing both full social and legal political citizenship and the socialisation, rehabilitation and curing of deviants until they become like 'us' (Young, 1999, p. 5).

A neoliberal social policy paradigm is now increasingly taking over 'from Finland to Australia, in relation to problem domains from crime control to health' (Rose, 1999, p. 53). Over the past two decades, the Danish universal welfare model, and the ideology behind it, has come under political pressure from advocates from left to right. Criticism from the right has been legitimated by economic crisis in combination with globalisation, immigration and altered demographics, pointing to the universal model being too expensive, ineffective and without evidence of efficacy. As a result, different competing and contradictory demands have been directed at state budgets, administration and organisation in terms of monitoring, marketisation and risk management (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2012, p. 15). Simultaneously, criticism from the left has addressed the welfare states' tendency to be paternalistic and stigmatising towards clients.

Parallel to a gradual transformation of the universal towards a residual welfare state (offering services only to those in special need) (Vallgård, 2010), the social sector has introduced a rhetoric of 'user empowerment' and 'democracy'. New measures have been applied such as 'user involvement' and the 'free' choice of services – involving contracts, action plans and treatment plans based on users' personal motivations and wishes – aimed at making users economically 'self-reliant' (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2012, p. 15, see also Newman & Kuhlmann, 2007). These trends represent what the international literature describes as 'a complete reorientation in social problem-solving' (Cruikshank, 1993, p. 329, 1999) and a transition in welfare management representing 'a shift from government to governance' (Jessop, 2002, p. 35) from applying the 'enterprise form'... to the conduct of individuals themselves', who act as 'subjects of their own lives' (Burchell, 1993, p. 276). This culture of governance challenges the role of both citizens and welfare professionals (Järvinen, 2011). 'Clients' are no longer to be passive recipients of 'welfare benefits', but rather active 'users' or 'consumers' of 'services', who face increased demands of 'autonomisation', 'responsibilisation' and 'accountability' (Burchell, 1993; Rose, 1999) in exchange for promises of 'self-development', 'liberation' (Villadsen, 2003) and 'having their individual needs met' through 'user-controlled services' (the latter familiar with the discourse of 'personalisation' of social services in the UK, see e.g. Needham, 2011; West, 2012).

In the present transition between policy paradigms, much Danish social welfare work operates in a state of tension between opposing demands and value systems (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2012, p. 23), not only between a traditional and a new welfare model, but also between different rationales within the emerging market and user-oriented neoliberal model. Thus, the latter appears to embrace political agendas of both austerity and budget reductions in combination with withdrawal of state activity and the bolstering of private markets for social care services; and bottom-up, decentralised approaches aimed at politically empowering users of social care. This situation offers the opportunity for analytical comparison and critical scrutiny of what is at stake for both citizens and professionals. Shifting political logics condition not only different social work practices, but also 'institutional selves': the locally salient images, models or templates for

self-construction and the general parameters 'used reflexively to make sense of the lives, circumstances, and personal travails' of actors within welfare institutions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 2). This identity-constructing work is often realised through narratives, in the dialectic between that which is narrated (which can be embraced and represented in the narrated symbolic order of the world) and that which is not (which eludes representation but nevertheless gives rise to fantasies).

## Methods and setting

My analysis is based on empirical material collected during fieldwork in HL for seven months in 2002 and in GC for three months in 2010. I followed everyday social interactions and conversations between staff and young people, participated in internal and external meetings and interviewed both staff and young people. HL, a municipal programme, was located in a suburb of a large Danish city populated by many ethnic minorities and welfare recipients, offering a five-day afternoon leisure programme for youngsters aged 10–20. Young people were referred to the programme via schools, other after-school programmes, sports clubs, the municipal social services centre or local outreach workers. Formally, attendance was restricted to six months; however, many stayed in HL for years. The target group was 'association-less'<sup>1</sup> children and young people, that is youngsters who did not participate in organised leisure programmes and activities. The HL staff comprised three male social work professionals, a municipal psychologist and a youth crime prevention consultant who supervised the weekly staff meeting. Children and young people in HL were primarily local ethnic minority boys and young men.

GC, also a municipal programme, was located in a socially and ethnically mixed borough of a large Danish city targeting young women aged 13–18, from both the local area and the city. GC offered a five-weekday programme, including two evenings, when the girls met to cook and share dinner. Enrolment went through the municipal social services centre or self-recruitment (also involving outreach work). Internally, the target group was described as 'wild girls',<sup>2</sup> officially as girls in trouble with crime, violence, addiction and 'grey-zone prostitution'.<sup>3</sup> Staff comprised five social work professionals, including four females and one male. Users of GC were both ethnic minority and ethnic Danish majority young women.

## Theory: Narratives, logics and fantasies

In both HL and GC, narratives play a central role in institutional life. According to narrative theory, narratives function to structure reality in order to create order and meaning in an otherwise chaotic and ambiguous reality (Bruner, 1987), to disseminate knowledge and interpretations (Csarniawska, 2010, p. 240), and to create identities through 'storying' ourselves and others in recognisable, intelligible and internally cohesive ways (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). In this light, narratives

are individual and collective symbolic articulations of the local social world as formed within specific cultural, political and professional contexts (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 94).

However, from a psychoanalytical perspective, narratives are not only created in the symbolic order, but also disturbed by intrusions from the real order, only to be healed in the imaginary order by fantasies. As Žižek (1989, 1991, 1997) asserts, we experience the social world as mediated through the symbolic order of language, laws, norms and conventions, which is driven by regularity, logic and reason. In this mediation, however, we lose access to the real order, understood as the immediate, uninterpreted being, which is driven by chaos and indeterminacy. While we only experience the real as mediated in the symbolic order, paradoxically, total symbolisation of the real is impossible: the real shows exactly where symbolisations, such as narratives, meet their limitations or break down. Narratives break down through a lack or surplus of meaning which disturbs the logic of the narrative. The space where the symbolic and real orders meet and are handled belongs to the imaginary order. The imaginary order has the nature of fantasy, dreams, hopes, belief and ideology, which according to Žižek is a precondition for socially constructed reality to appear coherent, despite intrusions of the real. The imaginary order works by presenting the incommensurability between the real and the symbolic order as a temporary disruption – a hindrance that can be overcome by practical measures through which the symbolic order gains completeness (Žižek, 1989, p. 173). Part of this dynamic is, however, that such an ideal state will never be realised because the problems that fantasies apparently solve are symptoms of fundamental discrepancies that cannot be overcome. This impossibility of realising fantasies nevertheless nourishes both efforts to obtain an ideal state, and the enjoyment of pointing at hindrances to obtaining such a state. Through these efforts the subject is protected from the anxiety related to direct confrontation with the radical contingency – that is structural incompleteness (Glynos, 2008, p. 277) – of social relations (Glynos, 2008, p. 287).

From this overall psychoanalytical conception of reality, looking more closely at how policy changes affect social work practices, Glynos's theory of the dynamics among political–social–fantasmatic logics is helpful. While social logics characterise practices (answering the 'what') by identifying the rules, norms and self-understandings informing social work practices, political logics refer to the processes through which social work practices are instituted, contested and defended (the 'how'). Fantasmatic logics address the ways in which subjects are 'gripped' by a social work practice (the 'why') which affects not only social work practices' its resistance to change, but also the speed and direction of change when it does happen (Glynos, 2008, p. 278). Focussing on fantasmatic logics of social work practices gives us insight into how workplace practices and professional identities are co-opted into political frameworks (Glynos, 2014, p. 8). In this process, fantasy functions to ensure that the dislocations and disruptions of everyday life are



experienced as an accepted and smooth way of ‘going on’: fantasy sets up an illusion that firmly keeps in the background the radical contingency not only of social practices but also the political dimensions of challenge and contestation of such practices (Howarth, 2010, p. 322).

The logic of fantasy operates by providing a fantasmatic narrative that promises a fullness to come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome. This ‘fullness-to-come’ refers to a ‘beatific’ dimension of fantasy; the obstacle, which may not be overcome, refers to the ‘horrific’ dimension, where the other – in various manifestations depending on the political and social context – is presented as a threatening or disturbing force that must be rooted out or managed (Howarth, 2010, p. 322; Stavrakakis, 1999, pp. 108–109).

In subsequent sections, I discuss narratives, logics and fantasies in the two programme settings of HL and GC.

## **Analysis: Narratives, logics and fantasies in programme settings**

### *Hinterland*

*Problem narratives and identities.* In HL<sup>4</sup> social logics – and eventually professional identities – were produced on the backdrop of primarily three narratives about the (mainly ethnic minority) boys’s problems. One narrative of ‘dangerous children in dangerous leisure time’ characterised the so-called association-less children as those whose leisure time lacked organised leisure activities, institutional affiliation or other kinds of adult surveillance. Another narrative of ‘children without Danish norms’ described children who, unable to fit into structured activities at set hours with certain rules, rhythms and norms, could not assimilate into leisure organisations or other institutions. These deficits of ‘institutional competencies’ derived from the children’s upbringing, which did not teach them to concentrate, to realise the general requirements of ‘modern reflexivity’, to adapt to institutional children–adult relations (power hierarchies and proper emotional attachment to professionals) or to ‘play’ in culturally appropriate ways. Finally, a third narrative about ‘children with dangerous parents’ defined them as ‘culturally neglected’ and deprived of a childhood due to their parents’ lack of parenting skills (the failure to provide, for example, adult surveillance, daily conversation, adult interaction and play), which left a void that HL must fill.

Narratives about the boys in HL were created and maintained at meetings comprising HL staff, the local crime prevention network and municipal grant-givers, which were aimed at ‘knowledge sharing’ to coordinate interventions for the boys and their parents. At the same time, this knowledge sharing established an arena for highlighting and obtaining professional acknowledgement of, as well as financial resources for, the professional social work in HL, and was therefore



central in the construction and legitimisation of professional identities among programme staff. Thus, through narratives about problem children, identity was explicitly created for children and implicitly created for HL staff.

*Social-interventionist political and social logics.* The practice of problem defining and knowledge sharing in HL is reflective of a traditional welfare-state, social-interventionist paradigm, which assigns the state a moral and political responsibility not only to secure social justice, but more importantly, to socialise, rehabilitate and cure problematic citizens in order for them to become like us:

The modernist gaze views the other not as something alien, [but] rather as something or [some]body which lacks the attributes of the viewer. It is lacking in civilisation, or socialization or sensibilities...[The welfare state gaze functions like]...a camera which is so strangely constituted that it can only take negatives of the photographer. (Young, 1999, p. 5)

In the social-interventionist paradigm, social practices assume a rationale where specific professional and institutional tasks, competencies, operational possibilities and resources form an interpretive scheme from which narratives are created about problem children. These narratives function as projections of what the children lack in the light of an ideal defined by welfare professionals. Three social logics that informed social practices in HL were containment, normalisation and network (Vitus, 2013a), which functioned as orientation points in the continuous development, explanation and legitimisation of professional strategies of action in relation to children and local youth institutions. Problem narratives were incorporated into these social logics of professional practices, and vice versa, by apparently bypassing inconsistencies in order to adapt the boys' problems into available interventions in HL. Thus, through the logics, 'dangerous children' became children who needed to be contained in HL under professional adult supervision and prevented from committing crime and causing trouble. 'Children without Danish norms' became children who needed normalisation in HL to acquire cultural competencies required by Danish institutions and leisure organisations. 'Children with dangerous parents' became children who needed protection in HL from 'cultural neglect' through a network of professionals.

Professional identities in HL were created through this interpretive work of adjusting the boys' trouble to social logics, which reflected interests and available solutions of local and municipal actors. Thus, social logics centered on finding solutions to the surrounding world's trouble with the boys. Returning to Young's camera metaphor cited above, in social-interventionist logic, the social professionals – as the photographic negatives – represented moulds for repairing the boys' deficiencies, in that they defined the norms that had to be projected onto the boys. Through this lens, the social professionals were the active subjects that formed the boys who became passive objects of the inductive process in the social professionals' work.

*Real paradoxes.* However, social logics in HL were disrupted in everyday social work practices. In the implicit ontology of social logics in HL, stemming from the social-interventionist paradigm, narratives about children were considered truthful and precise representations of the children's reality and a basis for social professionals to find the right solutions. However, paradoxically, these problem-solving efforts often failed due to the assumed realism of this ontology. Thus, in everyday dealings some solutions for the boys were abandoned as soon as the staff started to incorporate the (imagined) realistic barriers to these solutions. Reality got in the way when for instance the idea of finding a leisure job for a boy was refuted because, as staff claimed, supermarkets wouldn't employ him when they realised he was from HL; or when the plan of signing a boy up to a football club was dropped because staff said he didn't bother training, he only wanted to play matches, only to have fun.

The social logics also met their own limitations such as when the good intention of including (containing) the boys in HL simultaneously led to the boys' exclusion from other institutions. The logic of normalisation assumed – and on this basis judged – everything that the boys did as dysfunctional or abnormal. The network logic practised through the collaborative municipal network around the boys had a tendency to maintain them within the HL system, rather than pass them on to ordinary institutions or leisure activities (Vitus, 2013a). Through Žižek's lens, social logics (i.e. narratives and practices) produced in the symbolic were disturbed by the real, which made the regularity of the symbolic order break down. These disruptions by the real may also be read in staff members' ambivalent and paradoxical term for the institution: while they generally characterised HL as 'the children's hinterland', thereby emphasising their role as supportive professionals, when the social logics met their limitations staff resorted to the term 'the municipality's wastebin', reflecting that they were somewhat dismissive of the possibility of finding solutions for some children.

*Fantasmatic professional identities.* In HL, boys were offered what I call *deficit identities for lost boys*, boys<sup>5</sup> who the social system may eventually give up on. These were boys lack 'sensible' leisure activities, adult supervision and care, and therefore need safe leisure spaces for play and learning of 'Danish' institutional and relational norms for structuring their relationships with professional adults within and outside institutions such as HL. However, the symbolic order that these problem narratives seek to create is, as shown above, incomplete, ambivalent and continually disturbed. Thus, the boys did not necessarily fit into the narratives, the categories clashed with each other and the solutions pointed to in the narratives undermined one another. Disturbances from the real also included the indeterminacy of whether the deficiencies lay in the boys themselves or in society's ability to contain them: that is, whether the boys' deficiencies eluded comprehensive symbolisation.

The fantasmatic narrative that resolved the incompleteness in HL's symbolic order and the dilemmas in professional everyday life was a fantasy about the *compensating-including* social professional. This fantasy was realised when the

social professionals took on roles as ‘bridges’ between worlds they considered incommensurable for the boys, such as institutional parents, friendly Danes, cool adults, integrated immigrants and personal professionals. While the real appeared through deficiencies in the boys’ lives, these deficiencies also legitimised the fantasy of the compensating-including social professional. This was: the fantasmatic narrative about the social work professional’s ability to eliminate the deficiencies in the boys’ lives and to break down barriers that exist for the boys, in order to enable them to become normal, comprehensible boys who are integrated in the larger society. Such a fantasy, which serves to legitimise the hierarchical state- and profession-based logic of social work, Glynos (2014) calls a *fantasy of dependence*. This fantasy is driven by ‘a wish for pastoral or paternal care, a desire for protection by a Caring Other or for safe and unconditional containment’ (Glynos, 2014, p. 9). In social-interventionist political logic, the reality, organised around the idea of professional social work, would not appear coherent without the fantasy that the welfare state – with its apparatus of compensating-including social professionals – can integrate lost boys from society’s margin into its centre by compensating for the boys’ deficiencies.

In contrast to the narratives, logics and fantasies in HL in 2002, the next section explores how these had changed in GC in 2010.

### *Girls’ community*

*Performative narratives and identities.* In GC, social logics – and ultimately professional identities – were produced through narratives not about the girls, but about the programme’s community and method. Part of this method was to deliberately prevent the circulation of problem narratives about the girls (like those produced in HL), to ‘empower’ the girls and free them from paternalistic authorities’, such as parents and state professionals, stigmatising identity constructions. One of the social workers explained this institutional philosophy:

It is quite deliberate that we do not talk about the girls in staff meetings or among us adults. We strive *not* to have a common knowledge about the girls... We try not to amplify what happens when adults sit around a table and just talk... about the girls[.]... where you easily get to confirm one another in the negative things and create a specific approach to the girls... [We try] all the time to witness that they actually do things that are great[.]... highlight what they are good at, more than what are still their problems... (Staff, GC)

Thus, at staff meetings ‘information’ about the girls was shared only with the purpose of coordinating logistic tasks, and occasionally girls participated in staff meetings to ensure that staff members talked *with*, rather than *about*, the girls. Moreover, in contrast to the inter-institutional knowledge sharing in HL, in GC staff refused to read the case files when girls were admitted to the institution or to adopt official target group terms. Instead they described the girls from a resources

perspective, as ‘girls with pain in life in different ways, and with too little or failed adult support’; ‘wild girls—girls who live wild lives’ and ‘girls who have a lot of everything, a lot of energy, a lot of love, emotions... [T]hey are very intense’, the staff explained in interviews.

The method practised in GC was, according to the staff, based on social-constructivist ontology, which has gained increased foothold within Danish social work (Järvinen, 2012; Järvinen and Miller, 2015; Vitus 2012, 2013b), also as a response to an academic critique dating from the early 2000s of Danish social work professionals’ endemic clientisation and production of stigmatised lives (e.g. Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003). As part of this ‘applied social constructionism’ (Järvinen and Miller, 2015), the staff continuously attended to how they actively – through communication and pedagogical framework – formed the girls’ (and their own) actions and identifications. The leader summarised this professional reflexivity as ‘[a matter of] the framework you create... where you don’t have ten problem children, but rather ten different children, who have different problems that we can look into one at a time’. The staff also worked reflexively with performed narratives, meaning that the girls’ narratives about themselves represented the self-images they preferred and were able to relate to and act upon. Starting from such self-images, the social work professionals worked to broaden the girls’ possibilities of action and interpretation by posing questions of their self-understandings and interpretations of the world, and by discussing alternative ways of acting and thinking. Social constructionism was also articulated in discussions of concrete situations, in which the staff began from the assumption that they neither had nor were able to produce ‘facts’ about specific events (what actually happened), but had to rely and act on the girls’ positioned, situated interpretations of or reactions to a given event. In GC, the focus of social logics was on the girls’ perspective, rather than the surrounding world’s perspectives on and trouble with the girls.

*Neoliberal political and social logics.* Social logics in GC drew explicit inspiration from social constructionism as a tool to subvert clientisation and stigmatisation through the professional practice of ‘being the expert on [young people’s] lives’. As one staff member described from her former youth work, such approach produced strategies among the young people of ‘[telling] me what they believed I wanted to hear’. However, a number of the institutional measures in GC simultaneously tapped into neoliberal discourse. One was that the girls should participate voluntarily in GC. Within neoliberal ideology, the ‘user’ is assumed to be, in principle, free vis-à-vis the social system, which allows them to opt in or out of the system’s involvement, and the individual is considered detached from social structures (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2004, p. 124). This approach also applied within GC, as one social worker explained: ‘[We] dismiss the concept of social inheritance and instead differentiate all problems, saying “this you can do something about,” [this is contrary to] an understanding that if your mother has been a shit-mother, you too become a shit-mother’.

While in HL social logics defined responsibility and tasks for the institution vis-à-vis the boys, in GC logics addressed the girls' motives and behaviours. One social logic embraced a kind of 'narrative freedom' for the girls: 'You [the girls] have the right to define yourself... [W]hen you go through our door, [I don't need you to] justify yourself based on something negative or bad or some trouble', one staff member explained. This narrative freedom further implied an ideal of normative freedom, giving the girls authority to normatively frame the narratives they preferred to tell, that is, to define the moral order within which they inscribed themselves. Another social logic of self-development was formalised in an action plan made with a staff member and evaluated every six months. This logic was practised through provoking the girls' reflection 'about [their] own behaviour[, and]... new possibilities to do things differently, so [the girl] can obtain different relationships, constellations and situations in life', a staff member described. A third social logic was self-government, which required the girls to take full responsibility for both their present situation and the development they went through, or wished to go through. A staff member explained as follows:

It is very clear in my way of interacting with her that our relation exists in order for her to develop... [I]t is about giving her responsibility from day one [claps her hands]... You are the boss, you have the code, no one else has it... (Staff, GC)

Another way of practising 'responsibilisation' was through delegating (paid) 'assistantships' to girls with seniority in the institution, as long as the staff found that such work would enhance the girls' development. Assistants were also responsible for sustaining and implementing common norms in the group, and monitoring required self-discipline and self-control as internal role models. The social logic of self-governance, however, also requires that the social work professionals let go of responsibility:

[The social workers] may be able to create a space, but what happens in that space is a shared responsibility. I do not need development, [but rather]... the girls [do]. And it is so tempting to... take responsibility for each of them. The challenge [for social workers] is to endure the process... to dare to let go of total responsibility for everything. (Staff, GC)

A fourth social logic was of democratic community. Within this logic, staff members facilitated the girls' self-created 'Girls Community identity', which set a normative institutional framework that the girls were required to commit to, such as 'no drug use, no violence, and no "bitching" about each other', as the girls told me. This normative framework established a position and a stance for the girls to take, even when facing a general feeling of marginalisation: '[I]t might very well be that I am special, but strangely enough, it appears that I fit quite well into GC', as a staff member explained on behalf of a girl.

*Real paradoxes.* The social logics in GC met their limitations in the clash between (neoliberal) ideals and the obstacles of everyday professional social work. These disturbing paradoxes in the institutional symbolic order were also rooted in social-constructivist ontology's foundational relativism. While in HL the social work professionals created (based on social-interventionist ontology) a specific reality on which they acted, in GC staff created (based on social-constructivist ontology) a reality whose character and effect they continuously reflected on. This meta-gaze on their own construction of practices created a basic relativism and contingency that opened indefinite possibilities of interpretations or norms from which to evaluate the girls' behaviour as acceptable or unacceptable, or as indicative of steps forward or backward. This relativism latently destabilised the pedagogical project and made it difficult to act, on a reality that not only *is*, but is *continuously created*, through the social professional's work. The relativism opened for continuous questioning of which or whose construction of reality is valid, and for whom.

Moreover, to translate GC logics into social services system terminology, staff continuously had to exercise a narrative control which disturbed the girls' narrative freedom. A staff member explained:

When the girls formulate their goals for being here, we are removed from the [system's] language, so the case workers have difficulties in writing it into the action plans, [as in] 'I would like to participate in the Girls Community because I would like to do things with the cool girls there'. To me it is quite clear what this young person wants, but how do you formulate that into a problem-focused agenda? (Staff, GC)

At the same time, while the girls were required to wish for change but not to formulate their problems, a narrative control appeared in the ambivalent questions posed to new girls: 'Is it *you* who wants to change or is it your case worker who wishes it for you? Or, have your parents asked your case worker for help?' The girls were expected to desire self-development; however, whether this desire passed as genuine was up to their case workers, parents or the GC staff. The social logic of self-development was practised through a paradoxical balancing of action to acquire new skills and unlearn old skills. Despite the fact that some girls were addicted to hash, the staff maintained that rehabilitation became a developmental goal only if formulated by the girls. 'Abuse is not in itself a problem, but a symptom of other problems that we should rather take care of', a staff member explained. One girl's extensive hash use was characterised in the statement, 'if we begin to problematise her experimentation, she will soon become an abuser'.

The social logic of self-governance latently clashed with the girls' 'wildness', energy and intensity, which nevertheless apparently functioned as resources for meeting this logic. 'Well, ... stealing cars is a competency[,] ... no matter if it lies outside society's norms ... [Y]ou still have competencies that relate to being



acknowledged and feeling a part of a community, which is necessary for everyone', one staff member said. Thus, while the girls' wildness was considered a resource in their development, sometimes the chaotic nature of this wildness eventually hindered development of self-governing competencies. Consequently, it was unclear when staff should cultivate the girls' wildness or self-control.

The social logic of a democratic community met its limitations in various forms of social control and power. Ultimately, the staff held the power to define ruling norms in the institution, such as free choice, equality consciousness and a 'flat' democratic decision-making structure. On the one hand, the community aimed at being inclusive: 'My wishes [for the girls] do not matter compared to their own wishes'. On the other hand, the staff actively drew norms from the neoliberal paradigm, such as an ideal of economic 'self-reliance':

[We talk about] how great it is to be independent, because many people are brought up by the system . . . [with the idea that] they can claim this and that from the system, and 'they [the State] must pay this, I have a right to that' . . . [We] get [the girls] to see how cool it is to be independent and self-supportive, and how you can actually become able to control your own life. (Staff, GC)

*Fantasmatic professional identities.* Identities constructed for the girls in GC appeared to be *resource identities* for what we can term as *power girls* who instead of 'lacking' like the HL boys, had an excess of energy, intensity, activity, aggression and resistance which the surrounding society could not contain. The girls' characteristics of 'too much' became a starting point for their relationship with professional adults, both within and outside GC.

Social logics also met limitations within the GC, as the symbolic order was disturbed by the fundamental relativism established by the social-constructivist approach. Limitations and disturbances were grounded in the fact that staff members defined their work based on both the girls' definition of reality (rather than their own) and the effects that they as staff and the girls had on the world. In this way, the object of professional social work was continuously displaced. Whether the object was the girls' problems or developmental goals, it was continuously indeterminate, changeable and negotiable. Thus, for instance, the limits for autonomy and self-control in the girls' substance use and addiction became dependent on context and the individual. Furthermore, in GC, the real showed itself through the incompleteness of professional social work categories. The girls' resources, which served as the starting point for practices, were also considered that which complicated the girls' relationships with society and hindered their self-development work. The 'too muchness' of the power girls represented a piece of the real that resisted symbolisation and shows the impossibility of completely identifying what this too much means, contains and can be used for.

The fantasy that solved these dilemmas in GC social logics was about the *motivating-mobilising social professional* who facilitated the self-development of



power girls through reflective, ‘empowering’ coaching, trustful liberation and democratic framing, and enabled the girls to find their own resources within the voluntary community of GC. Such a fantasy, dubbed a *fantasy of independence* by Glynos (2014, p. 8), ultimately serves to legitimate market logics entering into state services by ‘bolster[ing] the idea that we can and should delimit in as precise a manner as possible the goods and services we produce and consume, thus making the whole idea of market transactions possible’ and to ‘reinforce or project aspirations of control, mastery, and self-sufficiency’. Following Young’s camera metaphor, within this neoliberal paradigm the girls were ‘empowered’ to become subjects who project and induce themselves (in ‘selfies’) under the social professionals’ witnessing gaze.

## Discussion

Comparing narratives and fantasies in HL and GC illuminates some implications for professional social work practices and identities in the current neoliberalisation of the public sector in Denmark and other European countries. Examining the interrelationship among political, social and fantasmatic logics gives us tools to understand the dynamics of workplace practice and professional identity formation through public policy as being products of social fantasy, rather than rational processes (Fotaki, 2010). Changing political logics thus create different social logics that, in order to function, require different fantasmatic narratives. In HL, to sustain a state-based, social-interventionist paradigm, the staff in 2002 produced a fantasmatic narrative of an apparently *compensating-including social professional identity* – as the negatives in a photograph of boys that the social professional had to induce – to redeem the demand of a welfare state apparatus of experts who, through this induction, met the goal of the assimilation of society’s marginalised lost boys.

Regarding GC anno 2010, the picture seems more blurred. Thus while social professionals through positive psychology – constructing a resource identity and other empowering measures – sought to fight the downsides of the social-interventionist paradigm (paternalism, stigmatisation and pacification of clients), the institution’s social logics nevertheless appear to have sustained a policy paradigm that increasingly embraced user and market-oriented neoliberal ideology. Thus, the fantasmatic narrative about a *mobilising-motivating social professional identity* – reflecting the girls’ ‘surpluses’, which they had to learn to govern and control – became a fantasy about individualism, self-reliance and independency from state support.

These fantasmatic narratives about social professional identities serve both to protect subjects from the anxiety linked to a direct confrontation with the radical contingency of social relations, and to keep at bay the political dimension of workplace practices – and social logics more generally – in which they are implicated (Glynos, 2008, p. 286). The political dimensions of social logics in HL lie in the beatific and horrific sides (Howarth, 2010, p. 322; Stavrakakis, 1999, pp. 108–109) of the fantasmatic narrative that sustains the social-

interventionist paradigm. Thus, the implicit beatific fullness to come of this fantasy – assimilation of the boys – presumes a horrific obstacle of the other. While this horrific obstacle may more explicitly perhaps be identified as the unequal social structures created by the market over which the state has only limited control, it eventually risks becoming the young men themselves. Thus the young men risk becoming the threatening or disturbing forces which must be rooted out or managed, eventually to be blamed for potential disturbances and failures of the social professional project. This fantasmatic narrative nevertheless creates a collective political space in that it nourishes an obligation of the welfare state to continuously combat these market-driven unequal structures to protect their victims.

In GC, the beatific side of the fantasmatic narrative and its fullness to come lies in the girls' individual self-realisation free from structural constraints. The horrific obstacle to overcome then appears to be the social professional him- or her-self – and eventually the welfare state – which, as threatening or disturbing forces that potentially hinder the liberation of the girls, must be kept disempowered. Paradoxically, however, contrary to the beatific promise of 'freedom', in fact, power girls are obligated via a moral responsibility to 'induce' themselves, and may – like the HL boys – end up blamed for the failure of the programme. This neoliberal scenario holds two potential dangers, one political, another ethical. First, as the state is disempowered, any collective political space of subversion seems to vanish; what is left is the individual's obligation to project and protect him- or her-self. Second, as self-projection becomes the final goal, any kind of prohibition and law (norms of society) also vanish as external points of reference. This lack of prohibition potentially leaves its subjects – in GC both the girls and staff – in a perpetual state of second-guessing what is expected of them (by 'the Other's desire', cf. Lacan (1998, p. 38)), which potentially obstructs any identity formation (as it causes psychotic tendencies).

In this, the fantasmatic narrative about individuals' empowerment to self-development may be particularly seductive. In Denmark, as the GC case illustrates, the neoliberal social policy paradigm appears to be boosted by critical social-constructionism and subversive 'empowerments-oriented' trends in professional social work. Historically, the concept of empowerment was part of critical Northern European social pedagogy adapting a mobilising collective (rather than an individualistic adaptive) approach with the goal of emancipation through raising clients' awareness of structural restraints, and of clients' then developing means of collectively combatting these restraints in their everyday life (Eriksson, 2014, pp. 174–176). What we see today is the ideal of empowerment being absorbed into a neoliberal political logic. Thus empowerment, hand in hand with an ideal of 'responsibilisation', marks a shift of the moral responsibility for social problems from the state to the individual (Wright, 2011, p. 290) with the risk of a blame-the-victim approach without anywhere for the victim to turn for collective, political redemption. According to Wright (2011), empowerment has become a fantasy that serves to conceal the

intensified political control – rather than freedom – by market logics over public policy areas, such as social services.

So what is the critical potential of this analysis? What might social work professionals learn while working in the transition between policy paradigms of either state-based or market-oriented logics underpinned by dominant fantasies of paternalism and individual self-sufficiency? A general point here is to acknowledge what the two cases have in common. One commonality is that whether rooted in the welfare state professional or the individual user, as Glynos states, both fantasies of dependence and *independence* represent flights from ‘the uncertainties, ambiguities, and ambivalences of *interdependence*’ (Glynos, 2014, p. 10). In the case of professional social work, this uncertain *interdependence* could imply both joint obstacles produced and efforts provided by the state, market and also civil society (including individuals and collectives of citizens) together in realising the ideals of societal inclusion and empowered responsibility for self and others.

Another commonality is that while fantasy is a necessary stimulant for policy and social professional development and an enabler of social projects, it is also an impediment to their realisation (Fotaki, 2010, p. 713). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, realising one’s fantasy is impossible because the subject survives only insofar as the desire remains unsatisfied. The obstacle, for instance, in the form of a threatening other transforms this impossibility into a ‘mere difficulty’, – a practical hindrance, a temporary disruption, cf. Žižek (1989, p.173) – thus creating the illusion that its realisation is at least potentially possible. In the case of HL and GC, the lesson may be that we neither can nor should overcome the market, the young people or the welfare state. This also means that while we should not give up political and professional dreams and ideals, if we carry on mistaking fantasies for reality, they will continue to mirror the misrecognised vision of ourselves and our society. As Fotaki (2010, p. 715) suggests:

The unique strength of psychoanalytic thought is that it demonstrates the injustice towards the other and alienation of the subject whenever we cling to impossible fantasies originating in the imaginary... [T]he emancipatory potential of psychoanalysis... lies in its power to highlight (and dispel) the imaginary nature of the subjective drive for unity, certainty and stability which underpins various societal projects.

Acknowledging the productive role of fantasy and its failure in the social arena may hereby present us with ways of bridging fantasy with reality in our social and political endeavours.

## Limitations of the study

This article sets out to compare professional identities in youth social work across two dimensions, institutional setting and historical time, to illuminate

how a third dimension, different social policy trends, play out in social work practices. To accomplish this complex analytical endeavour within the confinements of a journal article, informative and nuancing contextual details may have been left out.

## **Conclusion**

As I have illustrated through analysing narratives, practices, logics and – ultimately – fantasies of professional identities in two programmes of work with young people in Denmark, the shift in the public sector towards neoliberalism taking place all over Western Europe represents much more than administrative practices to streamline and reallocate tasks and responsibilities among public services actors. These changes have profound implications for the ways in which social work professionals not only understand and interact with users, but also in the ways in which they understand the mission of social work itself and their role within it. While this analysis illustrates how social professionals conform to social policy paradigms in order to sustain an idea of a coherent and meaningful professional identity, much may be said about the various ways in which narratives and fantasies may work to negotiate and subvert social policy paradigms. The question remains whether the distinctive close relationship between social professions and social policy (cf. Payne, 2006), which makes those in social professions particularly susceptible to social policy influences (Lorenz, 2008, p. 626), in the end may also provide them with spaces for political and professional contestation of both social policy influences and their own professional identities.

## **Ethics**

The study drew on recognised ethical guidelines within childhood and youth research (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). The study is reported to and approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency through The Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI), where Kathrine Vitus, was employed as a senior researcher during the data collection.

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I declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. In Danish, 'foreningsløse'.
2. In Danish, 'vilde piger'.
3. In Danish, 'grå-zone prostitution'.
4. For 'thick' empirical analysis of HL logics, see Vitus (2008, 2013a).
5. In Danish public rhetoric the rather derogatory terms 'loser boys' have been used to describe young men (both with non-Western migrant and ethnic Danish low class background), who face social marginalisation due to school dropout or unemployment.

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