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DENMARK

**BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: STATE-LED TERRITORIAL
STIGMATIZATION, INFORMAL CARE PRACTICES AND THE
INTERSTITIALITY OF LOCAL COMMUNITY WORKERS IN DENMARK**

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Between a rock and a hard place: State-led territorial stigmatization, informal care practices and the interstitiality of local community workers in Denmark

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relation between territorial stigmatization and community work in Denmark. In the paper, we firstly explore territorial stigmatization, relating it to the Danish context. We show how territorial stigmatization in Denmark happens via a complex amalgamation of bureaucratic practices which identify particular areas as problematic “ghettos”, and how this leads to top-down interventions upon many local residential areas, including local community work. Following this, we draw on participant observations in practices of local community work, and interviews with local community workers, to explore how they practically negotiate these particular political constructions of their work. We argue that local community workers come to take on interstitial roles – that is, they come to be in-between the state and authorities and the local communities themselves. This complex double role is what we call an interstitial position, meant to signify how Danish local community workers are both part of territorial stigmatization and simultaneously trying to escape from and undo this very role.

Introduction

This paper is about a particular form of social interventions in Denmark, namely “boligsocialt arbejde”, or what we will translate (somewhat loosely) as *local community work*. What the Danish name reveals, and what the English translation misses, is that “boligsocialt arbejde” often focuses specifically on housing (“bolig”). It is, in Denmark, a form of social work which focuses on the neighbourhood, on the residential area. So it has been since its beginnings in the 1970s, and so it is still. But whereas local community work is often, internationally, thought of as a particular practice which grows out of communities themselves, in Denmark it has in recent decades come to take on a curious form. Local community work, as we will show in the paper, has here come to take up a certain *interstitiality*. It is in-between, as we will show, state-initiated processes of bureaucratized territorial stigmatization (the “rock”) and precarious lives in marginalized, local residential areas (the “hard place”). Local community work, as we will show, both corresponds with (and grows from) the needs of local residents living (sometimes precarious) lives “on the ground”. Simultaneously, local community work is here a top-down initiated social intervention as part of the Danish state’s decade-long campaign against particular residential areas, defined as marginalized, and stigmatized as “ghettos”.

The paper proceeds in the following way: firstly, we describe territorial stigmatization, before relating it to the Danish context of “ghetto”-policies and local community work. Second, we describe the methodological approach and the empirical materials that this paper is based on. Thirdly, we show how local community workers perform their interstitial position by dissociating from their roles as authorities, and how they use this distance to build trusting relations to local residents.

Fourthly, we show how local community workers simultaneously associate *back* to various authorities, mediating on behalf of residents, and advocating on behalf of them. Finally, we discuss how this interstitial position shows the complexity of territorial stigmatization *in practice* – that (political) territorial stigmatization need not mean the complete exodus of

welfare services from local areas. Instead, we emphasize how our informants negotiated and, in some cases, attempted to negate the territorial stigma, exactly by way of their interstitial positions.

The debate about territorial stigmatization in Denmark

In 2018 the Danish Government (Regeringen, 2018) made a broad political agreement designating a range of vulnerable neighbourhoods in Denmark as “Parallel societies”. In this political agreement these neighbourhoods are characterised as physically, socially, and symbolically isolated areas challenging the social cohesion of the Danish nation. This recent policy is a Danish example of state-sanctioned symbolic violence leading to the territorial stigmatization of vulnerable neighbourhoods.

The sociologist Loïc Wacquant developed the concept of territorial stigma by combining Goffman’s concept of stigma with Bourdieu’s understanding of how class and social space is translated to territorial space. Wacquant’s ideas are wide-ranging and are, primarily, based on his work in French and North American cities. This means that, as we will see, some distinctions must be made before applying the concept of territorial stigmatization to the case of Denmark. Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014) have argued that we have to investigate the contextual structures that support the symbolic structures of urban marginality and that therefore, territorial stigma is not a static thing. The present article does this by focusing on the specificities of the Danish context and the ambivalent role of the community professionals. Before doing so, however, we will briefly go through Wacquant’s most important ideas around territorial stigma, relating them to the case of Denmark where possible. Wacquant argues that territorial stigma has four dimensions. Firstly that place of inhabitation and territory stigma should be seen as akin to the “marks of ‘race, nation and religion’” pointed out by Goffman and that it in a similar way can be transmitted through social inheritance (Wacquant, 2007, p. 67). He argues that this

form of territorial stigma can be easily annulled by social mobility, which points to the modifying effect of welfare states. Nonetheless, that territorial stigma is found even in Scandinavian countries with a well-developed welfare state (see e.g. Sernhede, 2009). Importantly, Wacquant's argument is that this type of stigma is not a question of individual failure or moral degeneration as was the argument in ideas of the underclass, but that it is a structural and institutionalized phenomenon tied to advanced marginality. The latter is a concept to encapsulate the results of increased precarization and increased insecurity of the marginalized groups, who are permanently excluded from the labour market, but at the same time hit by the punitive workfare measures of the "centaur state". The result is policies and practices of spatial seclusion of the advanced marginal parts of the population, the poor, the surplus labour and ethnic minorities of contemporary Western world (Wacquant, 2008, p. 2010).

Secondly, that in the light of exclusion from paid work on the labour market, residents resort to practices of individualized strategies of hustling and quasi-institutionalized shadow economies, and unreported forms of employment to get by. Moreover, the spatial disgrace leads to inwardly disassociation strategies and micro-area fragmentation. That residents retreat into the private sphere disassociating from the neighbourhoods and express intra-neighbourhood distinctions demarcating particular groups as those carrying the stigma of the neighbourhood.

Thirdly, and significantly for our purposes, the territorial stigma leads to service exclusion and discriminatory practices of welfare professionals: '[...] spatial disgrace warps the perception and behaviour of the operators of the civic arena and the economy [...] as well as the delivery of core public services such as welfare, health and policing (law-enforcement officers feel warranted to treat inhabitants of lowly districts in a discourteous and brutal manner)'. (Wacquant, 2016, p. 1083)

This process of professional disassociation and reproduction of stigma from the inside out is similarly conceptualized by Blokland as emulation: ‘Emulation, e.g. making sense of inequalities and contributing to their durability through “the copying of established organizational models and/or the transplanting of existing social relations from one setting to the other”’ (Tilly 1998a:10) helps us to understand place-making in which precisely not the same individuals with names and faces and their own stories to tell, but similar interlocutors are involved. Through emulation, stigmatization occurs, as we will see, not just from outside in’ (Blokland, 2008, p. 34)

In other words, the idea of emulation draws out how stigma is a relational phenomenon tied to collective narratives and schemas of sense making that shape collective relations. Stigma becomes part of the cognitive schemas that shape the perceptions and actions of professionals across different localities. Moreover, emulation is not only a concept which refers to how stigma produces mental geographies (Parker and Karner, 2010) that system representatives draw with them in to the neighbourhood, it refers as well to how residents through narratives of the system emulate particular relations to and fears of public authorities, and thus emulate particular roles associated with stigma from the inside out (Falloo and Birk, 2018).

Fourthly, that symbolic derangement is underpinned by the labelling of vulnerable neighbourhoods as the “Badlands”, “ghettos” and “parallel societies” in public policies (Bourdieu, 1999; Schultz Larsen, 2011, 2012; Wacquant, 2007, 2016). Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014) argue that this is a process of “[...] racialization through selective accentuation or fictive projection” wherein, especially, sociocultural differences are seen as “divergence [and] hostility to dominant national norms” (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1274). These areas become viewed by political elites as vectors of social “disintegration” originating in race and religion rather than poverty, which underpins the legitimization of punitive policies being enacted.

Together, these dynamics of territorial stigma portrayed by Wacquant are very similar to what Skifter Andersen (2003) portrayed as the inner and outer forces in the exclusion of vulnerable neighbourhoods in a European and also Danish context. However, he is critical of the focus on the changes in the labour market and precarization of the residents as the main driver of segregation as it is presented in Wacquant's perspective, since, pockets of poverty have persisted also in boom times. Moreover, Skifter Andersen argues that the Danish welfare context means that the vicious circles of exclusion have a slightly different expression than in the American or even French contexts (2003).

Similarly, Jensen and Christensen (2012) have argued that residents in territorially stigmatized areas might have more agency than suggested in Wacquant's comparative framework: they might *resist* the internalization of the stigma that Wacquant presupposes. Moreover, and pertinent for the present focus, they point out that repeated local policies of neighbourhood regeneration in their area of study suggest that the Scandinavian welfare states have more of a mediating role in alleviating the effects of territorial stigma than Wacquant suggests. Particularly, they argue that the role of local welfare professionals is not simply one of reproducing spatial disgrace and symbolic degeneration of the area and residents, but rather one of underpinning collective action and feelings of autonomy. Likewise, Sandbjerg Hansen (2019) shows, based on a study of the NorthWest neighbourhood in Copenhagen that state professionals have an overwhelming presence in the neighbourhood. In this sense, a key result of the particular Danish configuration of territorial stigmatization is that the territorial stigma *legitimizes* further professional interventions (Birk, 2016).

This is very different from Wacquant's notion of welfare services retreating from stigmatized areas. Moreover, Sandbjerg Hansen argues that although the local professionals are shaped by the neoliberal policies of the state, they still serve as a corrective to the spatial stigma. This

happens via the insistence of local community workers that the local residents are resourceful and agential actors rather than “passive client[s]” (Sandbjerg Hansen, 2019, p. 9),

Local community work in Denmark

Before going into further details about territorial stigmas in Denmark, it is useful to provide some contextualization around Danish community work. Over time, Danish community work has had a continuing experimental role in relation to the innovation and development of the Danish welfare state. Its earliest roots go back to the Danish Settlement movement which worked to relieve concentrated poverty and overcrowding in inner-city Copenhagen in the 1940s and 1950s. Here social helpers assisted poor families, and sought through small practices and training exercises (often targeted at ‘housewives’) to generate well-being and empowerment and capacity development for the local community (Fallov and Nissen, 2018). However, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that community work was developed as something distinct from social work performed in the local authorities. In the experiments of the 1970s, community work had a more radical and community mobilizing character establishing itself as something that should counteract the individualization and alienation of social work bureaucracy. However, during the consolidation of community work as a social work method in the 1980s it was noted in an evaluation of the practices of community workers that that it was hard for them to get away from a role as state-related social control (Adamsen and Fisker, 1986; Fallov, 2017). At the same time, these early reflections on the role of the community worker point to its ambivalent role in that ‘local environment workers’, or community workers, work to alleviate and tackle neighbourhood stigma but their mere presence is evidence of that same stigma. Thus their mediating role as the ‘left hand of the state’ (Bourdieu, 1999) is also reproducing the symbolic degradation of vulnerable neighbourhoods. Through the 1990s and the early 2000s, local community work became formalized as part of national strategies, focused on intervening in marginalized areas of non-profit housing (Fallov,

2013a). This is a parallel development to community work in Sweden, as described by Sjöberg and Turunen (2018) where community work in a similar manner has moved through phases of emergence, institutionalization, radicalization and differentiation, but in Sweden community work seems to have kept a more varied and often more radical expression, while Danish community work in that sense is more closely entangled with state and local municipality policies and funding programmes.

Where Danish policies of the 1990s focused on segregation and the active role that state programmes could have in mediating segregating forces, more recent strategies, such as the National Strategy to Tackle Parallel Societies (Regeringen, 2018), are an epitomization of a movement towards understanding spatial exclusion as something that is tied to the excluded areas themselves and thus should be handled primarily through an intervention in the so-called ghetto areas. Eligible areas are decided through the Danish government's infamous 'ghetto list' (Birk, 2016; Hansen & Frandsen, 2020). Since 2010, this list is published annually, and names non-profit housing areas with high unemployment, low income, crime and high presence of ethnic minorities as 'ghettos'. The 'Ghettolist', as it is officially called, is a case of state-sanctioned marginalization (Schultz Larsen, 2011, Christensen 2013). In a very direct manner, this list is a case of territorial stigmatization: it directly stigmatizes particular areas based on ideas of ethnicity, crime and marginality. The list racializes social problems by focusing, in large part (though not exclusively) on ethnic minorities, and by having minority background as an explicit criteria for an area being a 'ghetto'. In response to these territorial stigmas, a series of area-based interventions have been initiated, interventions which as mentioned involve local community work.

Local community work is a small part of these, while the main part of the funding is allocated to changing the physical layout of the vulnerable areas, thus in the last instance changing the socio-economic composition of the residents (Christensen, 2015, Fallov 2013). Local

community work focuses on developing the neighbourhood-community-resident configuration, developing resident employability, relational resources, and social networks (Fallov, 2013b; Fallov & Nissen, 2018). Thus, the historical development of community work in Denmark is a development toward increased professionalization of community work, and community organization rather than community development (Fallov, 2015, 2017), thus developing and extending existing organization in the tackling of local problems rather than developing the problem-solving capacity of the communities themselves.

Local community work is regulated by Local Revitalization Plans, which run for four to five years. Although Local Revitalization Plans and local community work are initiated by the Danish state, they are the responsibility of the (non-state) *non-profit housing associations* in each marginalized residential area which works in partnership with the municipalities. This delegation of responsibility to the local housing associations does not mean, however, that the state completely disappears. While ‘Landsbyggefonden’ – The National Foundation for all Housing Associations - is the authority that regulates the making of Local Revitalization Plans, it does so partly under the legal direction of the state. This means that, for instance, the focus of many local community projects on getting residents into employment is a result of a shift in Danish social policies over the last twenty or so years (e.g. Peck, 1998; Nielsen, 2015; Sandbjerg Hansen, 2019). Local community work, then, is set in motion by the state, but through a series of displacements becomes the primary responsibility of housing associations. It is here that the specific articulations of local community work happen, and there is thus a degree of autonomy, self-regulation and distance from the state. The history of the policies of local community work in Denmark demonstrates the ambiguity at play here, and this is where we can begin to trace the *interstitiality* of this work. On the one hand, local community work is initiated and defined through the state and its policies (and, as such, entangled with the Danish

form of territorial stigmatization). But on the other hand, its specific articulations are left to the discretion of each local housing association and local municipalities. Local community work comes to occupy an ambiguous interstitial space. This interstitiality is central to the practices of local community work, as we will return to throughout the empirical analyses that follow.

Methodology and empirical materials

Empirically, the article is based on qualitative interviews with local community workers, and participant observations in six different local community projects in marginalized residential areas in Denmark. This work was carried out from December 2014 to December 2016. We conducted approximately 359 hours of participant observation of local community workers in Denmark - carried out by both authors (and one research assistant) - across six different projects. We followed local community workers as they went about their daily work, sitting in on meetings between themselves or with residents. 35 qualitative interviews with local community workers were also conducted. The interviews commonly focused on inviting people to speak about their practices, and elaborate on what we had observed during the fieldwork. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and, together with the field notes, analysed abductively (Brinkmann, 2014; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Additionally, we collected, read and analysed documents related to local community work, such as national and local policies and plans. All empirical materials have been anonymized for this article, including the names of the informants, and the locations where they worked. The six different areas in which we followed local community work were chosen to cover the whole of Denmark, but also to cover large social housing areas, and smaller areas, metropolitan areas and areas in middle size cities, areas which have had a long history of neighbourhood regeneration and local community work and newer projects.

Dissociating from authority

In this section, we want to illustrate how local community workers in our fieldwork come to occupy an interstitial position by actively dissociating (Munro, 1999) from their positions of authority. As we will show, many local community projects – and the people working in these projects – are, partly, funded and initiated by bureaucratic systems of authority, such as the local municipalities. Some local community workers will be fully employed in the local projects (which are primarily funded by the local housing associations), whilst others will be funded by the municipalities.

In Field N, the local community workers emphasized their ‘freedom of method’, that is, how they had freedom to choose how to carry out their work in this particular area, how to help residents, and how to fulfil the objectives laid out in the Local Revitalization Plan. This was possible because of their formal positioning ‘in-between’, with no day-to-day and direct legal oversight carried out by municipality or state (but delegated to the housing association). Throughout interviews and observations, local community workers would stress how they had a freedom of method, how *their* work differed from that in the municipality. What we want to suggest in the following is that this emphasis on being *different* to the municipality or state is important for local community work more generally. That is, we want to suggest that this particular statement – that these local community workers were *different* from the municipality (and the various people working therein) – was not just a statement, but an active performance, a part of their on-going practices. That is, we will argue that the *dissociation* from the municipal and state-led authorities is crucial for the local community work we observed, because it enables them to perform part of the interstitiality, which mediates the territorial stigmatization which they are a part of.

Let us give an empirical example of this by way of a local community worker, who we shall here call Michael. Michael worked in a local community project in a small residential area near

one of Denmark's larger cities. He was, technically, employed by the municipality, rather than the local housing association (as local community workers typically are). This organizational double role was found in all the areas we investigated. This meant that while Michael was employed by the municipality, he would spend the majority of his time working *in* the local community project. This is where his office was, and the other local community workers were his colleagues. Michael's share of the project was primarily about unemployment and young people. His job was to assist unemployed local residents with finding work. In an interview, Michael reflected on this double nature of his work.

'Of course I am the system, and I am a mechanism of control [...] I am a part of the system, I have to recognize that, but I can hide it out here, I can say that I am a local community worker and not a part of the job centre. So my position is, luckily, that I don't have to force people.' (Michael, interview)

Michael, here, shows his awareness of his own interstitial position. As he recognizes, he is a part of the system, a 'mechanism of control' as he calls it. He is directly associated with the local job centre, and thus with the stringent measures they can impose on those unemployed and obtaining unemployment benefits. In Denmark, as is typical for those states where welfare has transitioned to workfare, people who are unemployed and obtaining unemployment benefits are subjected to a variety of measures to ensure that they apply for jobs and so forth (what Wacquant (2009) refers to as the centaur state). This, as we saw previously is also a central part of territorial stigmatization. In this sense, Michael's remarks on being part of a mechanism of control can also be interpreted as his own – implicit - awareness that he is a part of a governmental complex which, amongst other things, is part of producing a territorial stigma. However the quotation also reveals how he tries to hide his relation to this stigmatization and to the 'system'. He *dissociates* (Munro, 1999) from his own position of authority. Through dissociating from authority, Michael attempts to make and inhabit a position that is not

explicitly characterized by formal state authority. Such dissociations from roles of authority, from ‘the state’ or ‘the municipality’ are emphasized by many local community workers we interviewed.

‘I don’t have [...] a role of authority out here, and I don’t have a set procedure I need to follow, that says I have to work like this and this. I have an objective that says I need to try and influence the amount of young people out here that get an education, but how I do it is up to me.’ (James, interview, 2015).

James is, like Michael, employed by the municipality, but spends most of his time with the local community workers. James worked in a different project from Michael (Field A), in an area which was (at the time) on the infamous “ghettolist”. Similarly to Michael, then, James’ role is thus a result of the bureaucratic processes of territorial stigmatization. James has access to the municipal databases which contain information on local residents (that receive social services and benefits) and statistics about the area. But his main role is as part of the local community work project, where the municipality leaves him to his own devices and methods. In the quotation, he as well dissociates from his role of authority, while emphasizing how he still has ‘an objective’. At the same time, in the above quote, the relation to the state remains. James’ goal – to help young people into education or employment – is set by the government, informed by the perception of the local area as a geographical space of deprivation, yet his methods in achieving this are his own. Michael and James thus both dissociate from the municipalities in which they are employed. These dissociations are crucial in enabling trust between them and the local residents, especially as they are both officially affiliated with the local jobcentres. Further, their local placements *in* these community projects (and thus in these marginalized areas) enables them to more easily dissociate from roles of authority and to get in touch with local residents.

In the same manner, a project manager from another local community project, which we call field H, explains that because they do not have the possibility of sanctions, the residents' engagements in their projects is born out of interest. Moreover, the project manager argued that because they do not have to put residents through rigid demands of documentation and processes of visitation they can mobilize a different agenda:

'I think that many of the residents have the perception that we are hired *by them*, employed by them in their areas to do something for *their* neighbourhood. They do not perceive of the municipality in the same manner, and I think that is exactly our justification' (Interview with project manager Field H).

A woman similarly in an interstitial position as Michael and James, employed both by the municipality and the housing association in Field H, let us call her Karin, explains further that the disassociation to the municipal authority is an advantage because:

'...many socially marginalized people have resistance towards the municipality because they have experienced that the municipality force them to do things or take something from them [sanctions] or refuse benefits. So they are negatively biased towards the municipality...sometimes this relate to a concrete experience that someone in the municipality have done something to the family...in this way we [local community workers] come in with a completely different hat on working with some of the same issues but with a totally different agenda in that we do not take something from them and we do not oblige them to do anything in the local community. That there is a different hat means that the residents see you in a different way. They see you as a person' (Interview with Karin field H)

Thus these community workers explain how their disassociation with the municipality allows them to mediate. This process of mediation can be understood via Blokland's notion of

emulation (Blokland 2008). That is by having a different agenda they can intervene in the way that not only municipal professionals act in accordance with territorial stigma, but importantly also mediate and change the bad experiences and cognitive maps that residents have of municipal authorities.

As such, the ability to dissociate from the municipality is crucial to carrying out local community work, because it allows local community workers to *not* be seen as ‘mechanisms of control’, even if they are (ambiguously) part of the local authorities. This process of dissociation is crucial to their work.

Ambiguous interstitiality: associating to authority

What makes local community work in Denmark complex to describe is that it often comes to occupy these interstitial positions: by dissociating from the state and from municipal roles of authority, the local community workers we followed and spoke to tried explicitly to distance themselves from traditional spaces of state power and authority. At the same time, however, the interstitial position also allowed the local community workers to draw on their associations to authorities, and to associate to local authorities to try and help residents. Let us illustrate this by returning to the example of Michael, who described dissociating from the official spaces of authority. But Michael not only dissociates from these spaces, he also *associates* to local authorities, but often on behalf of residents.

Speaking of their work in the local community work project he said:

‘[W]e can do everything from having small conversations about how to write a job application to being lay representatives or writing recommendations and all other kinds of stuff [...] we can go very far, from waking up people in the morning so as to make sure they give a good impression, to driving people, to going to meetings at schools and that kind of stuff.’ (Michael, interview, 2015)

By acting as a lay representative for residents, or by joining residents for meetings, or performing mundane caring practices as waking them up, he helps them make life liveable in a complex society, wherein knowing how to navigate bureaucratic systems, write applications, wake up 'on time' and knowing how to relate to public authorities is a necessity. In these cases, Michael draws explicitly on the power and authority that his position also brings. This was a general theme across our empirical materials. The local community workers we spoke to did not only disassociate from and disavow contacts with local authorities. These associations are also, as (Falloo and Birk 2018) point out, translations. That is, these associations are ways in which Michael (and other local community workers) try to mediate on behalf of residents and by doing so, changing the perspectives that the authorities may have of them. This is a crucial point regarding territorial stigmatization, where we saw the assumption that territorial stigmas means that welfare professionals treat residents with disdain and brutality. This is not the case here, rather the opposite: Michael, and most of the local community workers we encountered, on the contrary often went quite far in attempting to speak on the behalf of local residents, and to help them escape from positions of precarity by building bridges and social infrastructure to different forms of authority (Birk, 2017)

Here is another example from field N:

'Angela says that a woman has texted her yesterday and this morning. She reads the text message out loud. It speaks of being afraid and of needing help to complete a move out of a home, and that her doorbell keeps ringing. Both messages contain the phrases 'help me'. Tess says that it [the message] needs to be handled by her or Lina. Tess tells Angela to forward the texts to her, and then she might bring it with her the next time she visits the municipality.' (field notes, 2015)

This is an instance wherein local community workers attempt to care for the life of the resident *through* associating to the local municipality. Here, providing proper and adequate help and care

for the life of the resident is only possible through involving other authorities. In other cases, local community workers ensured to associate residents with local health systems, and local institutions such as schools. What we want to emphasize here, is that care performed by local community workers is also deeply entangled with the associations and dissociations that perform their interstitial positions.

In another local community project (field H) they run a project with economic counselling which assist residents in their relations and associations with different forms of authorities. The fieldnotes below situate us in a moment where a resident had come to get assistance with applying for housing benefit. She needs help with the computerized application system and the resident and a community worker sit together in front of the laptop together with a whole range of ID documents, leases and bank transcripts.

‘the resident says that she has also bought a car and the expenses to that should be added and they type away on the laptop. They sit together and look at the screen talking about the date that the housing benefit should start. They look at the lease. The resident ask how it is with regard to the salaries and tax in this instance. The community worker explains that this depends on whether this is part of a housing association. The community worker draws the computer near to check something, and the resident exclaims “this system is simply not made for human beings!” The community worker answers no housing benefit systems are definitely not made for human beings’ (observation notes field H)

This limited excerpt from fieldnotes indicates that the relation between the community worker and the residents is developed by assisting the resident connecting to the authoritative housing benefit systems online. The community worker helps translate instances where the categories are difficult at the same time as the resident has to translate her situation to the community worker. The relation develops from something relatively technical to something more personal,

as it turns out the resident also needs help with assistance for her son who is moving to his own flat after staying in foster care. The interstitial position that the community worker here has come to occupy builds on her contacts and her knowledge of the municipal assistance system. This, in turn, allows for trust to develop between her and the resident, which again allows her to help the resident associate with the municipality in what is conceived of as legitimate ways and therefore to make her eligible for assistance to her problems.

To summarize our argument, local community workers both dissociate from and associate to positions of authority. Their work depends on this interstitiality – it depends on the local community workers being able to both dissociate from state authorities and to associate *to* state and municipal authorities when necessary.

Concluding discussion

In the preceding paper we have tried to convey the complexity of Danish community work, both in terms of its long history and its entanglement with numerous forms of policy. We have argued, moreover, that Danish community work is caught in a tension between the authority and policies of the Danish state and the concrete, often precarious lives of those who live in areas that become designated as marginalized or even as “ghettos”. This tension means that local community workers, by necessity, perform an interstitial position through dissociating from and associating to various spaces of authority. This indicates that the ‘occupational space’ (Das et al., 2015) of local community workers is more complex than either being part of ‘top-down’ state policies, *or* working ‘bottom-up’ with the community. Parton has argued that social work originally developed *in-between* ‘[...] the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the state and society’ (Parton, 2000, p. 455). Drawing his argument from Donzelot (1980), Parton thus argued that social work ‘[...] fulfilled an essentially mediating role between

those who are actually or potentially excluded and the mainstream of society.’ (Parton, 2000, p. 457).

However, the preceding analyses also emphasize that local community work in Denmark has a more complex configuration which transcends a binary of exclusion or inclusion. Indeed, as we have seen, Danish local community work is deeply implicated in the state-led practices of territorial stigmatization. Yet, at the same time, local community workers practically attempt to negate this stigma via mediating between residents and local authorities, translating on behalf of them, and otherwise advocating on behalf of residents.

Writing about marginalized groups in south London, Back argues that:

‘Tales of social damage, hopelessness and injustice always make for a good sociological story. But the cost is we too often look past or don’t listen to moments of the repair and hope in which a livable life is made possible. This is why an attention to everyday life matters because it offers the possibility to admit such ordinary virtues to serious attention.’ (Back, 2015, p. 832).

Similarly, one could tell a critical story about local community work in Denmark, about the problematic societal structures that participate in the marginalization, othering of residents, about how it participates in territorial stigmatization of both areas and residents. We can criticize local community work for not paying more attention to oppressive structures, but this should not blind us to the practical, mundane work that goes into caring for people, into helping them find their ways through and in spite of problematic structures. It is a generation of ‘tactics’ in the face of oppressive ‘strategies (de Certeau, 1984). In this article, we have emphasized how local community work becomes an interstitial practice, which, both performs social control and sanctions and mediate in the territorial stigma of the neighbourhoods. From its positions on the interstices, local community work thus strives to, as Back puts it, *make life liveable*.

Bio

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