

Danish social workers have become the moral agents of the state

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Social workers in the job centers have gone from being the citizens' advocates to being agents of the state. New research shows that many social workers are positive towards this new role that they have been given.

"We are turning the professional social workers into moral agents. This development recalls a time before the [welfare state](#), when we had poor relief and when the extent to which the state could help you depended on your own dignity."

This is the assertion by Marie Østergaard Møller, who is associate professor at the Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University regarding the labour market policy that has been carried out in Denmark since the 1990s. More specifically, since 1994 the opportunities for citizens to get relief from the state have been reduced. To a much greater extent than previously, people who are unemployed or sick are compelled to enter into job training, activation or re-training – rather than sitting at home doing nothing. We are seeing this, for instance, in the tightening of the requirements for those who receive early retirement pension.

For several years Marie Østergaard Møller has conducted research on the self-understanding of social workers following the implementation of the Danish government's active labour market policy, and the results are quite surprising. The findings appear in the journal *Social Policy & Administration*.

"Social workers at the job centres in Denmark are welcoming towards a policy that actually limits their professional freedom to make decisions about which form of aid a citizen should get. I was expecting them to tell me that their professional identity as social workers was under pressure. But that's not what I heard," explains Marie Østergaard Møller, whose research is based on several interviews with a range of social workers.

Through the moral lens

The active labour market policy was implemented to secure equal treatment of all citizens. In the past, social workers had more authority to assess each case and tailor a specific course of action according to the needs of the person in question. For the same reason there used to be major differences in the way the different municipalities handled procedures. And the politicians wanted that to change.

But according to Marie Østergaard Møller, social workers still have the agency to assess individual cases. The primary task of social workers is to estimate whether the citizen in question is eligible for early retirement pension, and they are faced with several moral choices. The social workers now have to consider each citizen through a moral lens.

"The employees at the job centres are weighed and measured based on their ability to hold back on distributing resources. Each social worker has to be more strict and make sure that fewer people than before are allowed to get [early retirement](#) pension," says Marie Østergaard Møller and explains that the social workers are no longer allowed to take into consideration why a given person has ended up in the situation he or she is in.

Previously, a big part of the social worker's job and professional ethics was to identify the structural reasons why an individual had ended up in a given situation, for instance divorce, illness or financial trouble. But

now the state disregards limitations and focuses on the available resources instead.

"As a citizen, you can always make a difference. No matter what has happened to you. But the new activation policy aims to break with this line of thought that suggests that citizens are entitled to certain privileges. Today you are judged on whether you actually deserve these privileges. It is all about moral judgement, and that is why this approach sounds so much more shrill to us."

Affects citizens individually

According to Marie Østergaard Møller, the social workers have generally embraced this new labour market policy because there is a clear and positive logic to it: That everyone can do something, and that the client's personality and approach to life can make a difference.

"The policy appeals to something other than their professional competence. When presenting their arguments to me, the social workers gave me layman's explanations to why some clients get one thing and others don't," says Marie Østergaard Møller and proceeds to explain that the resistance shown by the social workers towards the policy is seen primarily in their work with society's weakest. They are the ones who really feel the effects of the new regulations.

"Quite often, the social workers use these new regulations against the citizens that are labelled 'non-deserving'. But if you are deemed 'worthy', the [social workers](#) are more inclined to loosen the restrictions. This means that the resistance towards the policy is seen in the meeting with the clients – and not as a professional battle against the system."

More information: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1515.2012.00835.x/pdf

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