

WORKSHOP: WORKING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Working in a merciful and contested organization – the case of municipal parking officers

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Short abstract

This paper is about the work and management of parking patrol officers in a Danish municipal department responsible for parking law enforcement. The job as a parking officer is un-skilled and fairly light in terms of physical demands, but quite demanding in terms of contact and coping with disgruntled car-drivers. In recent years the municipality has developed a strict policy in regard to parking, increasing both the enforcement of parking rules and the prices for parking. Alongside this development, the municipal department has become renowned for management's active and ambitious work to improve the working environment for parking officers, and to employ diversity management.

Regarding parking officers as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010), the paper addresses the characteristics of their work and the challenges posed to the individual employee and manager. Becoming a parking officer is not only a matter of being able to cope with people on the street, but also being able to cope with colleagues and managements' particular expectations to your personality. Since the department of parking is part of a public organisation these expectations become all the more complicated (Hoggett 1996). They rely not only on the revenue from parking tickets and organizational credibility, but also on the availability of unskilled work for job-seekers and integration and retention efforts in staff-management.

Introduction

The Danish public sector accounts for around 30 percent of Danish employment (Danmarks Statistik, 2011) and is traditionally a central actor when it comes to alleviating problems of unemployment. Besides including people in subsidized jobs, the Danish public sector creates and provides many jobs, which require low or no formal skills for people on the edge of the labour market. This particularly takes place within the care sector (Labriola & Lund 2009), but several

other low- or unskilled service jobs exist in the public sector. This paper presents one of these jobs: the parking patrol officer in a municipal setting. As many other types of unskilled work in Denmark, the job as parking patrol officer is a possible entry point to the labour market for people without formal education, without formal Danish education or people who have been worn out in other occupations. My fieldwork among parking officers and their managers in a municipal department has focused on how the managerial ambitions to be an inclusive organisation are articulated and put into practice and how these ambitions connect with the actual content and practice of the work undertaken by the parking officers.

This paper is primarily an empirical paper as my analysis of the material is in very early stages. It should be mentioned, that my analysis will draw on a governmentality perspective (Foucault 1991 ; Dean 1999; Rose 1999) and I think of my empirical work as a search for the *mundane practices* (Rose and Miller 2010) of inclusiveness.

Fieldwork

My empirical material consists of field notes from 15 1-day shadowings (Czarniawska 2007) of parking officers during their everyday work, qualitative interviews with five managers in the centre, one shop steward and three parking patrol officers. I was a participant-observer for three days of job interviews, on selected days during a three-week introduction course and at a court proceeding in which a parking patrol officer was called in as a witness. I also spent one week as a participant observer in the parking centre's shop watching the service work at the counter.

Accounts from the field

In the following I present two accounts from my fieldwork. One is about diversity management as applied in the hiring and recruitment of parking patrol officers told by a manager. The other is an example of the management of emotions. In these accounts I present the material as small stories – this approach is inspired by narrative approaches to ethnography (Czarniawska 2004, Elliot 2005, Gubrium & Holstein 2009)– regarding the stories as some of the mundane practices of inclusion.

Diversity management in a low-skilled job

The following quote from a former manager of the parking officers illustrates how she as a manager serves as a gate-keeper to the Danish labour market:

“They [the parking officers] ask me, what is the future for me? And I say: your future is not to be a parking patrol officer forever. The future is, that when you come here, with another ethnic background, you have the possibility within a year or two, to document that you are able to keep a job, to fill out a job, you pay your taxes – because they want permanent residence or citizenship ... but then I hope you will go looking for another job, because most of them are way too qualified for the job as parking officer... you can also get a recommendation from here, but most importantly: you get an understanding of what Danish worklife is about” (Interview with manager in the technical department)

According to this story, the meaning of holding the job is to become more employable in other jobs. The manager does not expect or wish to keep the employees for too long but rather to help them on to another more qualified job. This manager also tells me about her experience with diversity management as a series of experiments and a long line of individual stories with mostly happy endings. But the following story of the hiring of a transvestite tells us about the limits of hiring:

“The job centre asked if we could take Catherine in for a jobtest. We said: there is nothing we can’t do...[but] It was too big a challenge. After we had had Catherine half a year [in the technical department], the shop steward came and said: I have to tell you, it doesn’t work. We had Catherine with us on the street, but .. you know, big breasts and pearl necklaces and wig. There were too many comments [from people on the street]... So I said to Catherine: Catherine, I simply have a problem letting you out on the street because we attract too much attention... and I can’t guarantee the safety – neither for you nor your colleague.” (Interview with manager in the technical department)

The manager concludes: *“But we gave Catherine half a year in the labour market, where we did what we could to find out what the obstacles were for her to stay here..... but at the same time, I felt: Damn’ it, it didn’t work... after a while, you want to be challenged by the ultimate, right? But, I have to say, that was a defeat...”* (Interview with manager in the technical department)

The story shows how the manager has a personal ambition to try out all sorts of ‘characters’ among her employees – she attributes personal satisfaction to this part of her work.

Managing emotions

The managers of the parking patrol officers all point to the importance of the parking officers’ willingness to cooperate in a new organizational structure, which has meant more responsibility

delegated from managers to work teams. But the work environment consultant articulates another important skill: in efforts to keep an employee, who is at the risk of dropping out of the labour market, it is crucial that this employee is ready to cooperate in these efforts. If not, they may have to fire the employee. The different perspectives in two stories by the work environment consultant and a parking officer illustrate the complexities of this process:

Given that the physical and psychological harassment from disgruntled car-drivers and others on the street is a major strain in the work environment, it is a part of efforts to prevent illness, to make the parking officers able to face these challenges and to follow up on those officers who experience assaults. The work environment consultant is eager to offer managerial care and attention as a remedy to solve the individual parking officer's problem – as we have seen illustrated in the collective story above. This type of care has meant attention to the parking patrol officers' record of assaults, i.e. how often they report having experienced critical instances on the street. The work environment consultant talks about 'repeaters': Parking officers who tend to experience harassments more often than others. The story goes, that this is because the particular parking officer is not good at tackling harassments calmly. She tells us about the "repeaters":

"We have had some, who have repeatedly been assaulted, and usually there are reasons for this. It is because they have...some psychological problems from many years back, which come up when they are angry or afraid, when they meet an angry car-driver. We simply hire some external psychologists for them, so they get a proper debriefing. They get built up again, so that they can face the job. And it has actually helped. We use that a lot."(Interview with work environment consultant)

A parking patrol officer told me another story. He told me about two assaults, which he experienced in 'Trouble Street': a street which is renowned as a bad area with many aggressive car-drivers. I knew from my shadowing of other parking officers, that many of them refused to patrol in this area although management wanted them to. After reporting the assaults, the parking officer felt an uncomfortable focus on him and his psychological condition from the managers he had at the time. He now worried, that the attention could lead to a firing:

"I used to be one of those who reported everything. I am not scared of the assaults, but of the management, that my name comes up again. I don't want to register cars without number plates [which means extra contact with the managers] and I don't want to be a mentor for new officers. I

have made an agreement with my new manager, that I just don't report any assaults... I am afraid of losing my job. But it also has a lot to do with where in town you are..." (Fieldnotes from shadowing parking officer)

By doing what management values, namely patrolling in a dangerous street, he puts himself at risk and when this action, which is in line with the values of the organisation, by 'fate' leads to a series of assaults, his actions are not recognized as appropriate by management. While management signals that they want employees to patrol in Trouble Street, they apparently don't really expect it. In the parking officer's story, we can perhaps recognize a double-bind problem (Bateson 1972; Gudiksen 2007): He describes how he is trapped in a situation where the managers express two messages where one denies the other: 'we want to support you by giving you psychological counseling' vs. 'if you need too much psychological counseling, you are not suitable for the job'. He is also trapped between: 'we want you to be flexible and patrol in all areas of town – including the troublesome areas' and 'if you become a person with repeated assaults we may have to fire you'. According to his story, the parking officer is in a position, where he cannot comment on the messages. His position is low in the workplace-hierarchy and he is afraid, that attention will disturb – or even terminate - his employment relation.

Concluding remarks

I have given empirical examples of two types of managerial practices in the municipal centre for parking. Both practices – one in the recruitment process and one in the management of employees' self and emotions - are framed by the managers as examples of how they try to be inclusive. Not surprisingly these attempts do not always meet their ends. These are very early days of my analysis. One of the next important questions will be: what type of strategies of inclusion do the employees employ?

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