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# ‘Polyphonic’ welfare: Luhmann’s systems theory applied to modern social work

Villadsen K. Polyphonic welfare: Luhmann’s systems theory applied to modern social work  
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This article applies a series of concepts from Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory in an analysis of modern welfare organisations. The point of departure is that social help in late modern welfare states has become ‘polycentric’ in that ‘help’ is today being defined by various different agents: public, voluntary and private care providers. Empirically, this article investigates re-housing work with homeless people, a kind of social work which involves several different welfare organisations. The case study shows how these organisations define themselves by making internal constructions of their surroundings, and how their self-enclosed nature creates a certain ‘insensitivity’ towards one another. How to coordinate and translate within this ‘polyphony’ of incomparable observations and values represents a major managerial challenge for present-day social workers.

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During the last 15–20 years, most advanced welfare states have witnessed a social policy discourse, that speaks about the positive potentials of ‘welfare mix’ and more intensified public–private cooperation between different welfare providers. The idea is that different types of welfare organisations – public, voluntary and private – each have specific qualities and ‘comparative advantages’ when it comes to caring for marginalised people. In particular, we have witnessed a strong emphasis on voluntary and local organisations as new care providers for people who have turned their back on public services. These organisations are considered to constitute necessary, critical voices in the public debate, as pioneers in finding new methods for social work, and as providers of institutions and spaces where marginalised clients can be met in a more equal and genuinely human manner. In a sense, we might say that voluntary welfare organisations have been proclaimed ‘rescuers’ of a state-governed social policy that finds itself in an impasse, not being able to provide solutions to those welfare problems that are still considered a state responsibility.

Schematically speaking, the dream of the classic welfare state of an all-embracing, uniform system of public services has been superseded by the strategy of ‘welfare pluralism’. In most late modern welfare states we have witnessed an increasing policy emphasis on community-based and voluntary care provision

encapsulated by the popular slogans of providing ‘welfare mix’ (Ugo & Costanzo, 2002) or a ‘mixed economy of care’ (Gostick, 1996). In this situation, new agents have moved onto the stage, both as care providers and as participants in the public debate on welfare policy and its future directions. In effect, social help has been ‘differentiated’ so that a spectrum of different welfare organisations each define what help is according to their particular programmes and organisational identities. Borrowing from Luhmann’s systems theory, one might say that social help has become increasingly ‘polycentric’ in that social help is a theme which can be observed from various different organisations that each observe help from within their particular horizon, their programmes and self-descriptions. What constitutes ‘help’, therefore, is not a given, but is rather defined by a multiplicity of agents, often cooperating, overlapping or competing with each other.

The promotion of ‘welfare mix’ probably brings some positive changes and innovations within social policy. However, if the diagnosis of polycentric help is correct, it raises a number of questions pertinent to management of social services, welfare planning and problems of equal access to social services. First, there is a question of cooperation. In as far as the organisations conceive of help from different, or even incompatible, perspectives, how can different organisations cooperate

with the same client? Second, there is a question of the status of the clients. Which consequences does the existence of different conceptions of help imply for clients who depend upon several different welfare providers? And, third, which challenges for management and planning arise from the diagnosis of polycentric social help?

This article will illuminate these questions by applying Niklas Luhmann's systems theory to an analysis of practical social work. In this context, systems theory serves as an alternative, or at least a rarely acknowledged approach in the English-speaking research community. So far, the study of welfare organisations and social work has been dominated by a number of other constructivist approaches including, in particular, symbolic interactionism (Järvinen, 2004; Pithouse & Atkinson, 1988), Bourdieu's field analysis (Bergmark & Oscarsson, 1988), neo-institutional organisational theory (Levin, 1998) and Foucauldian perspectives (Parton, Thorpe & Wattam, 1997). Each of these analyses has differently sought to investigate the forms of power exercised in modern social work. Within this research domain, Luhmann's systems theory still awaits an international breakthrough, although it has been applied to social work in Germany (Baecker, 1994; Bommes & Scherr, 2000; Merten, 2000) and in a few recent contributions in the Scandinavian context (Andersen, 2003; Appel-Nissen, 2005; Moe, 1998). As Luhmann's systems theory suggests a multifaceted framework for understanding communication, power and organisations in a modern, 'polycentric' society, this article shall consider and apply specific parts of his theory to the analysis of modern social work.

The article is in two sections. The first section briefly introduces Luhmann's systems theory as a perspective on modern organisations, highlighting in particular the thesis of a historical movement from 'homophonic' to 'polyphonic' organisations. It also discusses how welfare organisations can be studied by means of systems theory – especially focusing on the question of organisational self-description and boundary construction.

The second section demonstrates empirically how help is defined radically differently by specific welfare providers. By drawing upon a case study from Denmark, this section describes how welfare organisations obtain self-descriptions by internally constructing images of their surroundings. The study shows how the involved welfare organisations define 're-housing work' – i.e. social work preparing the client for living in his or her own home – in incompatible ways, and how these incompatible definitions make necessary the employment of specific communicative strategies.

### Organisations in systems theory

It is a fundamental premise of systems theory that the observer must always carefully specify exactly what is

being observed. Or put differently, when observing we must specify our own distinctions, our own system of observation, as it determines how the world emerges for us. This also goes for organisational analysis: the categories we choose radically determine how the organisation emerges for the observing eye. The article chooses two strategies (out of several) for analysing organisations, which can be found in Luhmann: *systems analysis* and *form analysis*.

The *systems analysis* takes as its point of departure the distinction fundamental to systems theory: system/environment. This analysis observes how an organisational system creates itself by making an internal construction of its environment. Or, as Luhmann contends: 'a system constitutes itself through a process of autocatalysis or self-selection by reference to its difference from an environment' (Luhmann, 1982a: 88). Thus, an organisation's self-description dramatically depends on the way it constructs its environment – whether it constructs it as, for instance, consumers or as citizens with rightful access to its services, as a political landscape of alliances and power games or as a market for products. By constructing an image of its surroundings, the organisation concomitantly constructs an image of itself. However, an organisation is not only one system with one environment; it often operates with several system/environment constructions. We must therefore observe how organisations communicate a multiplicity of system/environment demarcations. An organisation might, for instance, construct itself as both a bureaucracy that implements governmental decisions and as an agent competing with other 'companies' on a market. In this way, we can avoid conceiving of the organisation as a stable unity with only one self-image in order to analyse how organisations construct themselves through multiple system/environment distinctions.

The *form analysis* describes how organisations attach themselves to functional systems in modern society. Here, we must shortly recapitulate Luhmann's fundamental thesis on the historical differentiation of modern society. Schematically, pre-modern society was based on religion as a universal explanatory framework, and there was a hierarchical segregation in classes (Luhmann, 1982b). Modern society breaks with this order as it sees the emergence of a series of 'functional systems', each of which refer to their own logic, their own rationality and their own communicative structures. The economic system, the judicial system, the educational system and the system of art are examples of such systems that employ different criteria for observing the world (Luhmann, 1994). In concrete terms, it makes sense that a law violation cannot be observed as more or less artistic when seen from the judicial system, whereas such an assessment indeed can be made from the system of art. The point that the different systems

are unable to understand each other's rationality and criteria for evaluation is crucial, and, in this respect, systems theory reflects Weber's diagnosis of modernity as a 'tragic' state that provides the individual with no ultimate reasons for choosing between its conflicting 'value spheres' (1946).

It should be stressed that Luhmann's systems are reproduced by means of communication. More specifically, functional systems are reproduced by communication operating through a fundamental *distinction* or *code* characteristic of each system. Such distinctions can be described as temporary ways of observing the world, each of which for a period of time attains stability and installs expectations to the continuation of the communication. For example, the judicial system operates through the distinction legal/illegal, which means that everything that can be observed is positioned either at the 'inside' or at the 'outside' of this distinction. Judicial communication can only observe from its own rationality, which transforms the world into legal problems that can be determined as legal or illegal (Luhmann, 1992). We emphasise that functional systems are abstract systems of communicative logic that exist in modern society. They have no specific location or physical boundary since any organisation system or interaction system can communicate through, or one might say 'activate', their codes.

Organisations activate the codes of functional systems by forming one of the symbolically generalised media of communication that each functional system bases itself on – e.g. money (the economic system), law (the judicial system), power (the political system) or 'the learning child' (the pedagogical system). When an organisation, for instance, turns a problem into a question of paying or not paying, it forms the media of money, and this has drastic consequences for how communication can continue, and for how the organisation fundamentally emerges. It certainly makes a difference whether welfare organisations attach themselves to the judicial, the educational, the economic or the religious system when communicating about their clients. We might say that when an organisation decides to communicate through, for instance, money, law or faith, it thereby activates those abstract communicative logics that the functional systems offer for communication. The specific effects this attachment or activation has upon the organisation's communication must, however, be examined empirically in each particular case.

### From 'homophonic' to 'polyphonic' organisations

Taking systems theory as their point of departure, sociologists have advanced a general thesis about the specific character of some modern organisations (Andersen, 2002). The basic premise is that the differentiation process of modern society saw a crystallisation

of organisations attached primarily to one functional system and thus dominated by its specific communicative code. This differentiation meant that each functional system would be 'institutionalised' in the shape of particular organisational forms; in the case of, e.g. the healthcare system, these include hospitals, clinics, children's nurses and so on. Such focal organisations, which communicate by means of a primary codification, can be defined as 'homophonic' organisations because a homophonic organisation 'has a primary codification that regulates the relevance of codifications' (Andersen, 2002: 34). Seen from this perspective, political parties, public administrations and nongovernmental organisations would be dominated by the political code, 'govern/governed'; businesses, banks and stock markets would be dominated by the economic code, 'to pay/not to pay'; whereas universities, research institutions and scientific journals would be dominated by the code of the scientific system, 'true/not true'. In short, homophonic organisations have a primary functional coupling.

One might ask, however, whether this stereotype of organisations as primarily attached to one functional system adequately depicts present-day organisations. Andersen (2002) suggests that more and more organisations operate with a multiplicity of codes, none of which are regulated by any fixed internal hierarchy. Therefore, as the static link between organisations and their related functional system increasingly dissolves, 'polyphonic' organisations emerge. Following from this argument is the thesis that organisations increasingly must establish links to functional systems and their various binary codes by continuous decisions.

According to Andersen (2002), organisational polyphony has emerged as functional systems have 'exploded' and exceeded their original organisational forms. As an example, he cites what he calls the 'explosion of education'. As a consequence of this development, the concept of the 'child' – a symbol of something not yet perfected, in the process of being formed by means of education, training etc. (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000) – is now increasingly applied to a series of new phenomena. Today it is commonplace to speak of such things as 'lifelong learning', 'supplementary training', 'adult education' or 'the learning organisation'. Pedagogical communication, therefore, is no longer restricted to particular organisations; on the contrary, individuals, families and organisations are increasingly being described in pedagogical terms. It seems that everybody and everything can now be turned into a 'child'.

The surplus of codes available for communication in a polyphonic organisation means that which code should be employed at which time is never a given. Theoretically, then, the modern organisation is traversed by a series of heterogeneous communicative codes that render impossible an *a priori* definition of one of those codes as the primary. This means that the same type of

organisations, e.g. care providers, can in principle attach themselves to different functional systems with crucial effects for their communicative structures.

**Polyphonic welfare organisations**

The question arises, then, whether welfare organisations can be conceived as polyphonic organisations. This answer could well be affirmative if we follow Majgaard’s (1995) description of the historical development of the social services departments. In brief, Majgaard argues that at the beginning of the 20th century, social services departments were established as judicially codified organisations for making decisions on citizens’ rights to receive help in accordance with social laws. Gradually, however, as social laws increasingly define goals while leaving the means open, considerations foreign to the judicial code begin to gain ground: pedagogy and health with their respective codes increasingly become available to welfare organisations’ communication. From the early 1990s, the economic code became more pressing as demands were raised that social work should not only be legal and ensure personal development, but also be a ‘good investment’ (given presumed economic crises in the welfare state). In principle, present-day welfare organisations can thus be seen as polyphonic organisations that must make continuous decisions whether to use the code of law, pedagogy, health or economy for communicating about clients and for making self-descriptions. This perspective is illustrated in Figure 1.

It has been suggested that ‘social help’ constitutes a separate functional system (Baecker, 1994), but this idea has met serious reservations from followers of Luhmann (Bommes & Scherr, 2000) and it has, therefore, been left out of the model. Similarly, it has been suggested that some welfare organisations attach themselves to the religious system and its concepts of unconditional care and ‘being where the other one is’ (Lindberg, 2006; Villadsen, 2007), and this suggestion finds some support in the analysis below.

Essential to the perspective of systems theory is that communication is pure ‘emergence’ and so has a very fluid character. Communication can change its operational mode from one moment to the next. If the codification changes in a conversation, not only does the whole content then change, but a new horizon for the continuation of the conversation is also established (Andersen, 2002: 30). For example, a district chief might say to a social worker, ‘You may be accurate when you say that the client is highly motivated, but we have no resources for that plan!’ Once the conversation changes from a pedagogical codification to an economic one, the problem of scarcity suddenly emerges, resulting in a new horizon for possible further communication and decision making.

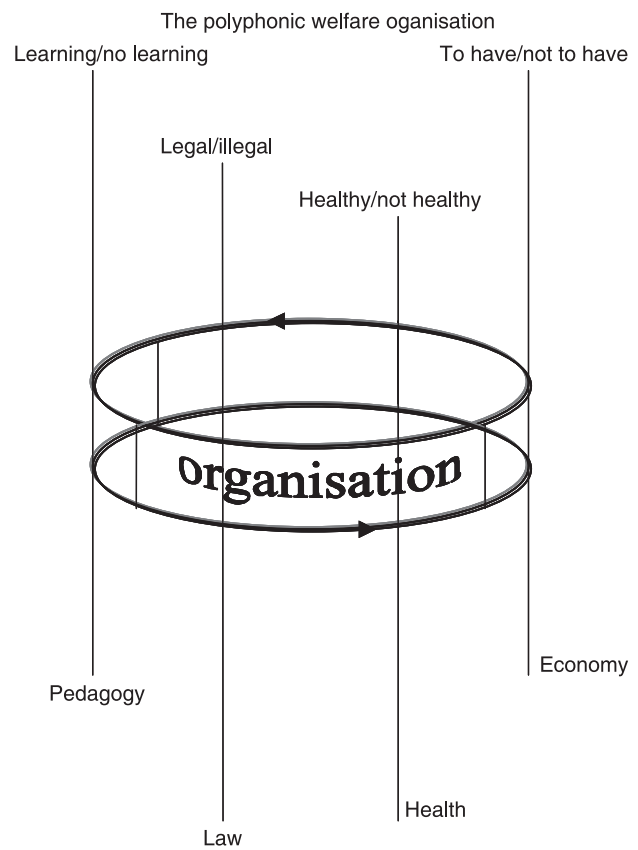


Figure 1. The polyphonic welfare organisation. My model, inspired by Andersen (2002).

Again, it must be emphasised that systems theory gives strict priority to communication in its conception of society, organisations and interaction. Traditional sociological and psycho-sociological concepts such as ‘meaningful action’, ‘experience’, ‘interpretation’ etc., are radically reconfigured or excluded from Luhmann’s theory. Thus, individuals as thinking and living beings are relegated to a position of ‘environment’ for communicative systems. The analytical problem, therefore, becomes one of analysing how persons, or specific aspects of persons, are made relevant by communication. More specifically, for the purpose of the case study that follows, a crucial task becomes specifying how the homeless person is made relevant by the involved organisation’s self-descriptions.

The following research questions shall take us from the conceptual framework to empirical analysis.

1. We take as basic premise the thesis of polyphonic welfare – a surplus of heterogeneous codes available for communication and decision making in modern welfare organisations. It makes a crucial difference which functional system a welfare organisation attaches itself to when it makes decisions, in the way that the organisation codifies a homeless client – e.g. as a patient, a subject of rights, a ‘child’ in need of

learning or an investment object. Can clashes between incompatible codes explain problems of cooperation and coordination among different welfare organisations?

2. We see welfare organisations as systems of communication that, in part, construct themselves by means of system/environment distinctions. That is, an organisation constructs its identity through internal constructions of the organisation's environment. The description of the environment is, then, at the same time a self-description. The question is how welfare organisations create themselves by means of such system/environment constructions?
3. The existence of self-referential and self-enclosed – but structurally dependent – welfare organisations creates a need for communicative strategies that can somehow make the complexity of one system available to the other. Which strategies can the organisations use to make clients recognisable for partner organisations?

### Modern re-housing work

We shall now apply these questions to a concrete analysis of practical social work with homeless clients. The case is 're-housing work', which is a kind of social work that aims to successfully place the homeless client in a permanent form of independent accommodation. Re-housing normally involves several organisations – usually homeless shelters supported by the county, a municipal caseworker and a housing support unit in the local social services departments. Homeless shelters are often run by voluntary organisations that contract with the local county, it is, therefore, a domain of both public and voluntary agents. The empirical basis for the study is interviews with shelter workers, caseworkers and administrative chiefs in two regions of Denmark–Fyn and Copenhagen.<sup>1</sup>

A key question pertaining to organisational identity, cooperation and management among the organisations involved in re-housing work is how these organisational systems delimit themselves through communicative boundary constructions. The following analysis will describe in more detail the self-observation of specific welfare organisations and the way in which these organisations make sense of their environment – including, in particular, the homeless client and collaborating organisations. Two organisations are of key importance in re-housing work: homeless shelters and those

housing support units that are to support clients when they are referred from shelters to independent housing.

The shelters generally construct their identities around concepts of care, closeness and personal engagement, as opposed to professional treatment. Employees from shelters emphasise that *their* approach to homeless clients is based on the principle of care-giving. Indeed, a leader of a shelter run by a voluntary organisation explains that a core objective of in-service employee training is 'to get rid of old conceptions about change through professional intervention'. By opposing shelters to other types of homeless services, the leader makes a clear distinction between care and professional intervention:

*Shelters are care institutions. The crucial thing is to give care on the clients' own terms, and this approach stands in opposition to all the other institutions where they believe that treatment and professional intervention is the recipe for success. The challenge has been to remain as a care institution that doesn't make such demands.*

When defining the shelter as primarily a care institution, the shelters communicate through a distinction between presence and distance. They stress the crucial importance of developing 'close and trusting relationships' with the clients. For a client to be capable of making the changes necessary for personal development, shelter workers hold the establishment of close relations as an absolutely essential condition. The client must be present physically at the activities in the shelter, and he or she must be involved mentally. A client must open up his or her personality and share personal or drug-related problems with employees and other users – these are considered to be essential first steps for a positive client development. An employee at a shelter run by a voluntary organisation explains:

*There has to be a trusting relationship if the client is to dare to give up some of the destructive habits and behavioural patterns that have so far been part of his personality. He needs someone to lean upon and relate to while undergoing such a change.*

The dominance of care in the homeless shelters' self-description means that the employees hardly ever consider the issue of how to maintain some distance from clients and how to avoid the risk of taking over responsibility. Rather, these employees take as their starting point that only on the basis of a close relationship can their clients fully recognise their problems, become aware of their own aspirations, and thereby initiate positive developments towards re-housing in society.

### The environment as an internal construction

Turning to the organisations and social work activities run by the municipalities, we see a striking difference.

<sup>1</sup> The case study is based on 35 qualitative interviews that were carried out in a study of re-housing work undertaken by a research team at the Danish National Institute of Social Research (Fabricius, Tilia, Ramsbøl & Villadsen, 2005). Semi-structured interviews were used, and respondents were asked about their methods for social work, their values and their cooperation with partners. All interviews were transcribed.

Here, sceptical reflection on the risks of helping clients too much and making them passive is dominant, as illustrated by the message ‘we must always keep the autonomy of the client in mind!’ Contrary to the self-description centred around care and close relations dominant in the shelters, the municipal social workers stress the importance of maintaining what they call an ‘impersonal relationship’.

The housing support units under the social services department play an important part in re-housing work, as they continue the social work after the client has been referred from a shelter. Crucially, these units emphasise ‘help as self-help’ as the fundamental principle for their work. An employee states:

*If there is a common principle for our work it must be the principle of ‘help as self-help’ – that I shouldn’t do everything for them if they can do it themselves. And this can be very difficult since many of our clients are true experts when it comes to persuading other people to do things for them.*

This quote expresses the idea of conducting social work with a certain degree of ‘coolness’ or self-restriction on the social workers’ part, so that they do not inflict themselves too much upon the client. Indeed, an overly caring approach would appear as ‘non-help’ in the self-observation of the housing support units. In several interviews, the staff members state that the kind of care that the shelters give can very easily become too intrusive and create passivity. A housing support worker says:

*They create a safe environment in which clients are fixed and restrained. The employees bond with the clients – they celebrate Christmas, they go to the beach, they arrange activities and so on. Sometimes I think that the clients are nursed too much – all this care can almost become a bit sickening.*

The housing support units are highly critical of too much bonding between professionals and clients and emphasise that good social work must be based on a ‘professional relationship with the client’. As this relationship is conceived as a professional effort, it does not imply any need for forming close relationships or establishing some kind of friendship. Therefore, one of the principles guiding the matching of clients with housing support workers is that they must be strangers at the time of their first meeting. The housing support units indicate professionalism and impartiality in their self-observation, but construct an image of the shelters as doing the exact opposite, i.e. as inflicting themselves on clients in an unprofessional manner.

Conversely, when evaluating the work of housing support workers, the shelters contend that municipal workers have an insufficient knowledge of their clients and that they often give up too quickly on difficult

clients. Shelter employees describe how municipal social workers tend to ‘accept a closed door’, and they stress that such a closed door is in fact ‘a cry for help’ from isolated clients. According to shelter staff, the reason that the housing support units do not approach their clients more actively is because they do not have ‘the necessary relationship’ with the clients. A leader of a county-run shelter:

*When it comes to the outreach workers, I think that the problem is in the relationship. That is... they do not reach the clients.*

We see how the organisations to a large degree construct their self-identity by describing other care providers as a negative otherness. These incompatible self-descriptions both create different positions or ‘gazes’ for observing the homeless person and set up different criteria for what counts as good social work.

It follows implicitly from the above quotes that the organisations attach themselves to different functional systems which ‘colour’ their communication differently. The municipal social services departments seem primarily to attach their communication to the judicial system, the economic system and the educational system. The municipal caseworker considers which services the client has the right to receive and if there are resources. Decisions are made on clients’ access to services by assessing whether the client is in a learning process or not. The shelters, on the other hand, speak in terms of unconditional care, the inner humanity in all of us and of ‘being where the other one is’, thereby activating the semantics of the religious system. This religious (Christian) emphasis on seeing any human being as a unique individual contrasts fundamentally with the political logic of the welfare state and its emphasis on universalism, equality before the law and uniform treatment (Lindberg, 2006). To investigate in more detail how welfare organisations shape themselves by attaching to functional systems and their communicative rationalities is an important challenge for future welfare studies, but beyond the scope of this article.

### Communicative strategies

From the standpoint of systems theory, social systems – welfare organisations included – are self-referential systems that are fundamentally insensitive toward each others’ communication. They can, however, communicate about the same theme, for instance ‘help’, or about the same client, but each will do so from within their particular horizon. They will apply different criteria for what constitutes good social help, what is good client development, what is motivation etc.

From this perspective, it should be no surprise that several of the organisations involved in re-housing work complain that they often have difficulties recognising

clients who have already been described and categorised by other organisations. A widely held explanation is that the referring organisation has simply not supplied enough information about the client. In other cases, the problem is said to be a lack of precision in the case files exchanged between the organisations. For instance, employees from a housing support unit state that they rarely receive sufficient information about a client before the client is referred to them. They emphasise that the written information often does not accurately represent the client – and sometimes is directly misleading.

Another possibility, however, is that the client has been codified in such a way – e.g. by means of diagnoses and medical concepts – that he or she cannot be recognised by the communication of the receiving organisation. A housing support worker says about the case manuals:

*Yes, it does say if the client has been involved in crimes or if he's suffering from any psychic disorder or something of that kind. Things like that are written down, but we have no idea how he'll appear psychologically. The description doesn't tell us this.*

Interviewer: *It doesn't say anything about that?*

*It says if he has received counselling in 1987 or 1988, or if he has been admitted to hospital and so on and so forth, but how he is right now...*

Interviewer: *This is not described?*

*Well, sometimes it is described in a few sentences. But then we experience something completely different when we meet people and start working with them.*

Interviewer: *Then you experience that the characterisation you've received does not correspond to your own observations?*

*Yes, this is sometimes the case.*

Social workers emphasise that sharing the same training and professional background does not prevent professionals from interpreting what they see very differently. Moreover, they state that the different institutional contexts can differ so widely from each other that the professional who receives a case often has no understanding of 'the sender's environment'. A chief of housing support unit:

*I think that part of the problem is that the message that is being conveyed is not clear enough. And sometimes I think that the recipient is simply not part of the world where the message is made. The recipient has his conceptions and his views, and the place where the message is made is characterised*

*by completely different ones. Quite frankly, I don't think that people are on the same wavelength these days.*

These difficulties notwithstanding, information is exchanged, particularly by means of those 'action plans' that are to form the basis for the cooperation between the social workers in the shelters, housing support workers and municipal caseworkers. Representatives from shelters mention that carefully elaborated descriptions of clients are crucial for establishing a positive cooperation with the social services departments. They also emphasise, interestingly, that 'writing the right things in the right manner' is of major importance when cooperating with the municipal caseworkers. In other words, communicating through the right codification is essential.

At the shelters, employees explain that a carefully elaborated action plan is a decisive condition for securing a client the quickest and most positive treatment from the social services department. A key element in facilitating a positive outcome is to obtain 'support statements' from other agencies – for instance, from drug addiction centres or psychiatry teams – that help reinforce the social worker's recommendations. An employee from a shelter run by a voluntary organisation in Copenhagen says:

*When I fill out the recommendations, I ask the contact persons to make support statements, because I've been told by the Social Services Department that the better the client is described, the better they can assess his case. As I understand it, clients aren't treated according to a 'first come, first served' principle. There is no queuing up. The client is evaluated according to the professional statements, which ascertain if the client is ready to move, etc. It's important to prove that there is development going on in the case. And it is for this reason that I ask for continuous assessments, so that the people in charge can see that there is progress in the case.*

What is described in the case file, then, is not the 'real client' but a certain picture of the client that will hopefully lead to the desired outcome of the case. Operating within polyphonic welfare requires the employment of 'strategies of the second order'. This term designates that the organisation describes itself or clients with the awareness that it could have made alternative descriptions. But the organisation chooses a specific codification for strategic reasons in that this codification makes possible particular communications, themes, argumentations, inclusions etc. (Andersen, 2002). How to decode other system's self-descriptions and 'parasitically' employ foreign codes is a key challenge for social workers operating in polyphonic welfare.



## Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate some possibilities for critically analysing welfare organisations by drawing upon systems theory – that is, the concepts of polyphonic organisations, self-observation through environment constructions and second-order communicative strategies. The case study shows that the organisations involved in re-housing work construct themselves and their conception of good social work in incompatible ways, creating a polyphonic domain in which conflicting images of client and helper simultaneously offer themselves. We have suggested briefly how the involved welfare organisations attach themselves to different functional systems.

The article's diagnosis has consequences for both social worker and client. For the social worker the decision of how to codify the client – and the concomitant valuation of specific measures and specific client developments – becomes crucial for his or her chances of bringing a specific case to a successful outcome. The success or failure of a case, then, appears to be highly dependent on specific social workers' capacity to think outside the terms of his or her organisation's self-description and to write in the terms of referring authorities and partner organisations. This situation makes possible very dissimilar paths for similar clients, as the development of their cases will depend upon which organisational systems they are observed by in the first place – that is, which welfare organisations and specific social workers they happen to encounter in their quest for help.

The social worker operating within 'polyphonic welfare' must undertake considerable translation work and the second-order communicative strategies. Today, it seems that the social worker must increasingly take up a position as a kind of *mediator* capable of translating between different systems and their communicative codes. Furthermore, the social worker must be capable of involving the right professionals and of using their expert statements to codify the client in the right way and at the right moment in the process. The 'polyphonic social worker', therefore, must not only be capable of representing clients in the 'right' way, but must also distribute discursive rights to different agents and mediate their statements in strategic inter-organisational communication. This complex management task seems to constitute an increasing challenge facing today's social workers.

The political promotion of welfare mix parallels another tendency in current social policy: the demand for a unique meeting with the client. Social work discourse presently speaks of 'meeting the clients where they are', 'respecting the client's unique individuality', and stresses that social workers should 'use their full personality when meeting clients', not merely their

professional background (Andersen, 2003; Villadsen, 2004). This increased indication of the employee's personality and unique resources creates a kind of 'individualisation' of social work problems. As part of the environment of help communication, the social worker is now made relevant as someone who should reflect upon his or her own 'self-management' and personal client contact when explaining the inevitable failures of social work. Perhaps, then, the problem of managing the multiplicity of incompatible codes is currently being transformed into a problem of social workers' self-management. How to re-introduce the organisational level and other structural conditions in welfare organisations' self-reflection would be an important challenge. More specifically, studying the specific conditions for doing social work that results from the promotion of welfare mix and increased public-private cooperation constitutes a key challenge for future research and policy debate.

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