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OBSERVING THE UNTOLD STORIES ABOUT DIGITAL BEHAVOIR

: An autoethnography exploring the social workers
discretionary facilitation process practicing digital tools in
The Job Center

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Abstract

The Danish social workers in the Job Centers, holds the key to shaping the public policy, at the frontline. The way they choose to facilitate their tasks practicing digital tools impacts the client's security and how the profession is being shaped. Policies reforms regarding digital tools aim at providing efficiency for the work processes and actively ensure the clients' legal rights. Policies are found to be interpreted differently on a street-level, contrary to the aim on a policy-level. In this research, the aim is to explore how the individual social worker, according to their behavior differently, use the digital tools within their discretionary power to solve their tasks and explore how those choices are affecting the client interaction. A qualitative inductive research design has been applied combined with the autoethnographic method to be able to observe the untold social workers stories. The theoretical lens is based on Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory to understand the social workers' behavior derived from the observations. The data shows that the social workers consider the client to be their primary focus in all tasks. According to the social workers, lack of training and missing clarification of the aim of introducing digital tools can undermine their professionalism and is interpreted as an alienating distrust of their discretionary actions coming from the managers. The social workers, who are choosing not to use digital tools can be perceived as a negative towards the introduction of digital tools and change. In conclusion, the lack of proper communication between social workers and managers can hurt the client's legal rights. It can create ineffectiveness of case processing instead of supporting the social worker towards an evidence-based discretionary practice based on professionalism rather than personal attitudes. This research can contribute to deepening the understanding of why social workers choose different actions. Finally, the observations have shown that. More effort should be put into more transparent communication. If this doesn't happen, the digital tools can instead of support and secure the profession end up becoming a disservice to the profession.

Key words: Street-level bureaucracy, discretion, behavior, digital tools, public institution.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My interest in this topic first developed in front of a screen. Nowadays, I spend a pleasantly amount of time using digital devices, similar to my colleagues in The Job Center. One day in December, a commercial on Facebook for an upcoming panel debate appeared, saying: “*Is the digitalization out of control in the public sector?*”. Following the question, if the employees in the public sector could follow the pace of the introduction of digital tools in their job.

Immediately, the topic was appealing to me, and I started to reflect upon it in a social science context. I found it interesting because of my personal experience in the field. I have experienced both great and less pleasant sides of using digital tools in my job as a social worker.

Still, I never quite saw ‘the world becoming more digital’ as a professional problem. However, it occurred to me that we are not all one, unified group of professionals¹, using the digital tools in the same way within our discretion. Our professional knowledge, personality traits, and behavior differ individually, and therefore the way we experience the digital tools could also change. The different questions started to arise, and a field of research emerged.

Michael Lipsky (2010) firstly coined the concept of street-level bureaucracy in 1971, and offered a way of understanding bureaucrats’ way of working within public agencies. Since then, new implementations of digital tools, guidelines for client security, and performance measurement within the public sector have arrived and shaped the social workers routines (Brodkin, E. 2016:25). Therefore, if one intends to explore ‘how social workers facilitate and modify their work’ and ‘how their behavior is influencing their use of digital tools within discretion,’ we must understand why their behavior may differ in the first place. As social workers employed in a public institution², we are taught from the first day at University that how we facilitate our tasks and use preliminary knowledge will define our professionalism and, ultimately, the relationship with the client. Thus, as social workers, we are aware that several external components as polices reforms, legislation, socio-economic and institutional framework affect the outcome of how the client is ‘met by the state’ and therefore, also affect ethical choices within the profession (Svensson et al., 2009:151). Still, Lipsky (2010) suggests that social workers are professionals with high expectations for themselves, and their primary focus is the human dimension. Howbeit, client contact, are no longer the most significant part of the professional’s task. Written text, journalizing, e-contracts, online training,

¹ Social workers, working in the employment sector of Copenhagen municipality, Job Center.

² In this specific research the bureaucrat is equal to social worker.

business meetings, e-mail, and skype meetings are nowadays just a small fraction of the digital tools which are now introduced in the daily work routine.

Lipsky (2010) points out that to understand the role of the social workers, we must recognize that the role has transformed over an extended period (Garret, P. 2005:530). We must acknowledge that a transformation of the public policy, has affected the 'bureaucrat' role expanding from street to also the screen dimension (Liljegren, A., Parding, K. 2010:270). Thus, policy reforms are implemented with one aim. Observations have illustrated that interpretation of legislation, and missing communications from top-level are communicated and used differently by social workers on the street and screen-level (Busch, P. 2019:9). Often, legislation procedures are vague and require professional interpretation at the frontline, since social complexity does not allow for schematic rules. Therefore, because of the different ways policies are being interpreted and applied by the social workers, the process may be contradictory. Still, as KMD (2020)³ stresses, those shouldn't be used as an excuse for wrongfully ethical choices and awkward interaction with clients. However, evidence suggests that the use of digital tools requires more precise communication, new training, and new facilitation process within the discretion. This is among the most critical factors, following Csiernik's (2006) thought.

Once social work was about the relationship created from mutual trust between the street-level bureaucrat and the client. Social work is the art of self. It's through the relationship, that invisible thing that happens between two people that change happens—we could lose that with technology (Ibid:10).

That creates new ways of interacting with clients, and finally, a new area of ethical caution for securing clients' legal rights. Just as face-to-face appointments and careful management of paperwork required ethical boundaries and excellent organizing skills, so does the use of digital tools and new procedures. Concerns from the social workers include; the increased pace of work, the use of discretionary power within; the role of e-counseling, e-mail, secure contact information, organizing of time, and further education because of a digital inspired gap between new and established social workers.

Lipsky (2010) clarifies that with digital tools introduced at a new pace, social workers can be put under physical and mental pressure and choose to behave towards or against digital tools because of

³This point is stressed by KMD, 2020: <https://www.kmd.dk/indsigter/aarhuskandidater-digitalisering-og-borgere>

the discretionary power given to them. As an extension of Busch (2019:6) and Lipsky, I argue that the social workers that are put under pressure and lacking clear communication from managers, may choose to act against the digital tools. I argue that the relevance of research can have a significant impact on how we perceive and facilitate the work practices within social work. Busch (2019:6) notes that social workers intentionally influence their work through professional choices. Most importantly, the professionals are the clients first and only contact with the government on a street-level. Ultimately, that is an important role that makes them influential in shaping the policies through their choices (Buffat et al., 2016:9).

Chapter 2: Problem Area

The core of the executive social worker tasks consists of making the right decisions concerning the individual client's situations. The operational activities, which involve directly making decisions on behalf of the clients—constitute the core of the social work profession. Recent studies have questioned how the discretionary role of the social worker has changed while technology has been introduced. To understand how the role has changed, we must first take a step back and understand the policy reform that has been introduced and created the change.

At the same time as, professional discretion was exercised in the Danish Job Centers, the employment sector was in 2011 being pointed out as one of the most critical areas to digitalize⁴. The Danish government presented the same year the blueprint: *Simplified employment effort* (Ministry of Employment, 2011:1). That led to an intensified digitalization of all Job Centers. One of the elements in the government blueprint was: *More digital solutions*⁵. The shift meant that The Job Centers turned their focus towards the private businesses and incorporated how these *actively* could play a crucial role in helping clients returning to employment (Finansministeriet, 2018).

The Ministry of Employment's 2011 analysis stated that the shift towards pleasing the business demands should ensure the clients' legal rights better, secure data protection, and making it easier for businesses to host client internships without doing tons of paper documentation. Contrarily that meant for the social workers, more screen time handling the same digital tools, creating contracts to

⁴ This digitalization was set to happen from year 2011-2015.

⁵ The government stated in the blueprint: "Denmark is at the forefront when it comes to digitalization. That of course we must also be in the employment field, and that is why we propose that digital systems for company-focused efforts will expand in the future" (Ministry of Employment, 2011:9).

ensure the clients' legal rights when attending internships. Pressman & Wildavsky stress in their book *'implementation'* (1973) that good political initiatives and intentions might differ from what is happening with those reforms after they reach street-level.

Therefore, the greatest challenge to the standards of the social work profession today is the way that the social workers need to administrate their tasks differently within their discretionary space while re-learning to use new digital tools. Of particular concern to social science is how digital tools have created new challenges for the professional role. There is a significant interest in the field for re-exploring how technology is being used within the social workers discretionary space⁶. Thus, it's fundamental to understand how the client-focused profession is being shaped by digital tools to understand where we must put the efforts in the future (Gilson, L. 2015:5).

Finally, there is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of the challenges associated with the complexity of the social workers individual facilitation of digital tools. It is unarguably a significant area of interest in the field of social science research.

Chapter 3: Problem Formulation

3.1 Aim of Study

Policy goals are often not clearly stated, and policy details are not finalized before implementation; (...) Different interpretations, attitudes towards digital tools, and different skills has resulted in work that has illuminated from behavior in different forms of bureaucrat discretion. Bureaucrat behavior is always complex (Gilson, L. 2015:7).

Gilson (2015) stresses that to expect a homogeneous outcome of imposed policy reforms is unrealistic in a profession that holds a human agency dimension (Ibid.:6). The social workers are exercising discretion daily, and the introduction of digital tools has led to a change in the social workers' routines, discretionary actions, and frustration. However, digital tools and the actions hereof have become an unavoidable key component in the human-centered field of social work.

This research aims to explore how the social workers in The Job Center are influencing the digital tools because of the way they choose to facilitate and modify their tasks within their discretionary

power. Thus, I argue from observations, that the social workers' behavior may shape towards or against the use of digital tools because of the lack of clear communication from managers and missing client contact created through the use of those new tools. Ultimately, the actions the social worker choose to act upon it's affecting their professionalism, their client's legal rights, and unarguable shaping the policy on a street and screen-level (Buffat et al., 2016:9).

It is crucial to stay *au current* in this dynamic and fast-changing field. To observe what happens to the social workers' most essential virtues when digital tools are introduced, such as social contact, and facilitation is at the heart of our understanding of how to shape future policy reforms, communication, professional training, and education. In the age of digitalization and in a time focused on data protection, demand, and efficiency, we must through research ensure that the humans within the profession can follow the pace, time-constraints and feel that their ethical choices are supported. Especially when increased regulations and content within the job dramatically change their role, now - more than ever (Feilberg, F. 2007:346).

I argue as an extension of her (Ibid.:348) approach to change; that the reflective social worker needs to focus on developing the skills and knowledge that there is required to manage change in the profession rather than waste time and energy on resisting the digital tools. The virtues and altruistic values embedded in the profession are still present; we need to understand how we can retain them within a more digital profession. Thus, the digital tools created to support social work doesn't end up becoming a disservice to the profession and the client.

Due to the implementation of digital tools, I argue as an extension of Schuppan's (2016) research, that the dynamics of organizations and the social workers' profession has undergone changed since 1980 (Liljegren, A., Parding, K. 2010:270), but not necessarily into something less important. The fact that the main communication channel on a day-to-day basis now is extended digitally and no longer only face-to-face contact creates new dynamics. It also requires an extension of discretionary autonomy because digital technology is involved in the interaction with the client (Ibid.:244).

Finally, digital tools, implemented in the legislation (Ministry of Finance, 2011) promised to deliver more effective and secure services. This promise cannot be fully achieved if they're still observed to be wrongly communicated and challenging the social workers. Furthermore, this research could emerge from both the client and the social worker perspective. Both perspectives can and is equally

important from a qualitative approach to create an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of digital tools. However, I have, due to limitations⁷, primarily chosen the social workers perspective in this research⁸. The final argument for carrying out this research is following Gilson's approach base on Lipsky's (2010) example:

We should in future research seek to understand street-level bureaucracies from the inside out, for example, through observational work (Gilson, L. 2015:16).

3.2 Research Question:

- *RQ1*: How does the individual social workers according to their behavior differently recreate, modify, and use the digital tools within the discretionary power given to them to solve their tasks. Furthermore, how is that facilitation process affecting the social workers interaction with the clients?

I aim at answering the research question with the following theoretical perspective:

1. A street-level bureaucracy theory, according to Michael Lipsky.
2. The concept of discretionary power within digitalization, according to Michael Lipsky.

Chapter 4: Previous research

In this chapter, I discuss research literature in one holistic discussion that explores digitalization from a street-level bureaucracy perspective. I also discuss studies that have focused on discretion in the age of digitalization, both in a national and international research context. The literature is discussed in context with my research question

To identify relevant literature from an explorative point, I undertook a semi-systematic literature review. The purpose was to synthesize my current state of knowledge within the field, explore the concepts of street-level bureaucracy and discretion, map the field, and highlight issues left unanswered by research. By *semi-systematic*, I mean exploring research literature: Firstly,

⁷ Time constrains, resources and the lockdown of Danish borders and quarantine – no contact with clients.

⁸ I am aware of the limitation this create for the study to only chose one narrative. This will be further discussed in the section of ethical considerations.

legislation⁹ that has affected the social worker's profession towards digitalization. Secondly, research concerning how digital technology has influenced street-level bureaucrats' role and behavior, and finally, research on the impact of digital facilitation of work tasks within discretionary power.

The publication '*Understanding Street-level bureaucracy*' Buffat, Hill and Hupe (2016) provides us with a detailed 'state of the art' account of theory and concentrate on how modern society addresses the roles of public officials, that works on the frontline and interact with clients from a chronological approach. The concept of the 'street-level bureaucrat' (Lipsky, M. 2010), has not gone unnoticed, as a considerable amount of literature has been published on the topic. As Buffat (2016) stresses, the concept itself has been understood and analyzed in diverse ways, other than how Lipsky first defined it in 1971. Both (Buffat et al., 2016:4) defined as a critical phenomenon called 'rule by officials' and later when the field has grown considerably towards various lines of research, which is still essential to the original theory. As an extension to research about street-level bureaucracy and the digital age, Schuppan (2016:244) in his research extended the concept of bureaucrats 'street-level staff' and created the name 'public servants.' He (Ibid.:244) concludes that digital tools adopted by governments will either broaden or reduce the street-level bureaucrat's scope of action. Camilleri (2002:252), as an extension, concludes that technology has had a significant impact on social work in an Australian context. Busch (2019) stressed that Schuppan's conclusion is a weak, inconclusive result. Evans (2004:872) complementary highlights that literature about the discretionary practice has pitfalls when it is rooted in 'all-or-nothing' formulations, and will not advance the current understanding beyond existing literature. He (Ibid.:2004) suggests that research instead should explore alternative arguments from a specific context that might illustrate how discretion is a series of different levels of freedom to make decisions. Thus, the degree of freedom professionals has.

Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach distinguishes between two ways to understand 'street-level bureaucrats. He (2010) adds to this original definition that: street-level bureaucrats are indeed individuals who uniquely interact with clients. A growing body of literature has investigated the discretionary power and the right to exercise the authority given to the social workers. In this research, the concept is also vital to the understanding of the street-level bureaucracy. The

⁹ Legislations is discussed in (Ejersbo, N. & Greve, C., 2014:209).

bureaucrat concept has, throughout different research literature, developed in various directions. Therefore, one may find multiple nicknames for the concept of social workers throughout literature; The protagonist of the state, the advisor, the monitor, the authority, the targets of the citizens, and the celebrated protectors. Collectively, these different ways of telling stories about street-level bureaucrats, outline that the social worker holds a critical role that, previously and still have a significant impact on their work practices. Ultimately, bureaucrats are professionals, autonomous, reflexive, and exert considerable influence, according to Lipsky (2010), Busch (2019), Buffat et al. (2016) & Evans (2004).

One particular research finding that has been a crucial inspiration is Svensson & Larsson's (2016) report: '*Digitalization and social work.*' Their report is an in-depth analysis of previous studies in a Swedish context. The method used was qualitative group discussions carried out in working groups in Helsingborg and Malmö. They also used focus group interviews with representatives from three municipalities. Svensson & Larsson (2016) point out that there is a gap in the field, which strongly emphasizes the need for new research focusing on digitalized social work. The field of digitalization in the context of social work within municipalities is relatively undeveloped as a research discipline. Their conclusion is transferable to a Danish context as; discretionary behavior influenced by digitalization in the Danish public sector has not been studied from a qualitative, ethnographic perspective. Therefore, it has an unexploited potential.

Svensson & Larsson (2016) argues that there is still a need to discover and discuss how professional social work can be developed further. Primarily through acceptance of technology:

Strikingly many arguments are about how difficult and challenging digitalization is for the social work (Ibid.:15).

Furthermore, the existing literature on digitalized social work is in a Swedish university context is extensive. That makes it hard to tie down the specific 'state of the art' in the field of digitalization. The reason for that is that previous research has been contradictory in the results because of the many opposing views on the topic. Thus, the academic literature has revealed the emergence of contrasting themes as; examination of the citizen's attitude *against* using an e-service when contacting the social services while many clients still prefer phone contact or physical meetings (Ibid.:15). Svensson & Larsson (2016) argues that previous literature and implementations related to digitalization have shown, to challenge central parts of the social worker's profession values:

One can in literature find the support that there is an obvious potential for better digital communication to be able to reach more people and to use digital and distance-based communication platforms (Ibid.:16).

This literature review has shown that more recent studies have been carried out with the use of qualitative methods that have taken the approach of explorative case studies (Buffat et al., 2016), group discussion, and semi-structured interviews ((Larsson, S. & Svensson, L., 2016). As Busch (2019) himself mentions in his qualitative research; Most studies relied on individual interviews, but other data were also exploited, such as document analysis, data from focus groups, and field data. Some authors (Edelmann et al., 2019:1) (Busch, P. 2019) have attempted to define research about digitalization and the impact of technology through empirically-based research definitions of digital transformation. These have derived from qualitative expert interviews, the social worker objective, social science students, or a manager in an institutionalized perspective. Others (Csiernik, 2006) has taken the same approach, but been much more concerned with discussing ‘The darks sides of the rising e-Government’ in a historical perspective and what effect it has had on the social worker’s job. Through open-ended focus-group interviews with students in the London School of Social Work, he (Ibid.:9) highlighted through reflections about how technology is affecting the practices of social work. Unlike Csiernik and Busch (2019), Buffat (2015) argues in their research that the impact of technology on the discretion can both constrain and enable street-level bureaucrats’ ability to exercise a discretionary power. As Busch (2019) concludes:

Several studies looked into how technology directly affected discretion. The results are inconclusive when we discuss human behavior (Ibid.:37).

Drawing on an extensive range of sources, the study results are varied. The reason for the variation is found in the human behavior, which is not always as predictive and homogenous within one organizational context as in theory.

Several studies have begun to examine how technologies have been trying to standardize decision-making and how it could conflict with street-level bureaucrats’ professional knowledge and goals. Related, the Danish Ministry of Finance legislative implementations have been focusing on some of the same aspects as an efficient decisions-making process. The Danish Ministry has, throughout the past 20 years, been raising several new questions about ethical, managerial, confidentiality, and

legal issues around the triangular relationship between the social worker, the client and the digital facilitation of tools. This topic has been extensively discussed in the field of political science and has been an excellent foundation to inform my research (Ejersbo, N. & Greve, C., 2014:209).

Another issue discussed within legislative literature is the challenges related to policy implementation within discretion. Several financial lines of evidence (Ibid.:209) suggest: Unequal treatment, client biases, ineffective, and costly practices that have more extended deadlines, and is costlier than expected. The interests in financial cost and efficiency are the main underlying motivations behind the researcher from the Finance Ministry's perspective. Many of the changes that technology sought to introduce in The Job Center through legislation have their origins in market-managerial and financial thoughts. That is one of the reasons why the Ministry of Finance is the facilitator of the digital implementations rather than the Ministry of Employment. Buffat's (2014) study is emphasizing professional aspects of street-level work, and her focus is on how technology can help street-level bureaucrats make better decisions in the field rather than the adverse the effectiveness.

The aim of this particular research is positioning itself differently from Buffat's (2014) research. Thus, it is not questioning whether digitalization should stay within the social work profession, or to argue against the rise of it. I also argue that to preserve professional values, this literature review indicates that there is a need for further research. Considering all of this evidence, it seems that research that explores the social workers discretionary behavior in the digital 'space' has not been explored from a qualitative point before.

Taken together, these studies support the notion that the potential impact of digital tools on discretionary practices has far-reaching consequences and potentials for the profession. This literature review revealed that this topic is scarcely investigated and that in-depth research is required in a Danish context. Still, several aspects about how digital tools can influence street-level discretion and the individual's facilitation process, remain relatively unexplored. Finally, a large volume of the published studies focus' mostly has been on the financial and managerial new public management efficiency aspects of why technology incorporation should take place in social work (Ejersbo, N. & Greve, C., 2014:209). I argue that this research position itself differently since the aim is not to recommend how to save the government money, provide solutions for change

management, or provide better monitoring of institutions (Busch, A. 2019:55). The study instead positions itself in the explorative objective of the social worker's perception, focusing on the critical human aspect of social work with the approach of institutional logic to explain human behavior surrounding the bureaucrats' work from a digital perspective.

Lastly, this research addresses a gap in the literature and seeks to understand how digital tools can influence the social workers' discretionary practices. The significance of this research is particularly valuable for Danish Job Centers, where the most significant part of employees are social workers exercising discretion. I argue that this research is crucial for Job Centers employers and employees to understand and map out the appropriate use of digital tools for the individual social worker to create clear guidelines and strengthen a holistic incorporation of digital tools on the street and screen-level.

Chapter 5: Theory

In the following chapter, I will discuss Lipsky's Street-level bureaucracy theory and the concept of discretion. The main concepts will be addressed separately. In the final section, I argue how the screen-level bureaucracy concept adds an important dimension to the analysis.

5.1 Street-Level Bureaucracy

Lipsky's (1971) sociological theory of street-level bureaucracy helps us understand what happens when the social workers by their discretionary actions become the rising face of The Job Center. He (Ibid.:13) suggests that public policy implementations are about the civil servants. They're at the policy front line in direct contact with the clients and, therefore, the *human face of the policy*. Ultimately, that means that their interpretation of the policy reforms shapes how they're using digital tools.

Nowadays, social workers interact through digital tools, both with clients and partner-businesses. In contrast to the policy-makers or managers that do not have direct contact with clients on the street-level, the social worker's frontline position offers both opportunities and constraints (Ibid.:13). This is because of the legislation that shapes the institutional framework and the fact that the social worker needs to act within that same frame while complying with: clients, time constraints, policy changes, and the introduction of digital tools within a discretionary space. The interaction has a

social dimension in the form of contact in person, by phone, via mentor, translator, internet technology, through email, skype, or other types of interaction.

Subsequently, the digital tools that were initially introduced in 2011 to offer more effective communication and facilitation for the social worker while promising to ensure the legal rights of the clients, instead have brought new constraints. Lack of communication that shapes the social workers discretionary process towards a misuse of the digital tools can become a disservice for the profession. Therefore, the introduction of digital tools has had a significant impact on the theory of street-level bureaucracy theory and discretion. The reason is that digital tools, as Busch (2019) notes, can at best legitimize the abilities and choices of the social worker within the discretionary space and secure the client's legal rights. At worst, it can be ambiguous, hinder, and control the social workers' ability to perform effectively in complex cases where they need to exercise discretion within a narrow timeframe and act in a legitimate, ethical way.

One of Lipsky's (2010) essential contributions added in his 30th-anniversary edition of *Street-level Bureaucracy* and stressed by Gilson (2015) suggest that the street-level bureaucrats' decision-making process is indeed understood as evidence-based and legitimized by choices based on professionalism compared to first where discretion was understood as choices based on social workers personal attitudes there wasn't based on professional training.

Their discretionary behavior is nowadays:

Patterned by the structural conditions of the working environment, rather than being the random acts of self-interested individuals misbehaving (Gilson, L. 2015:10).

Therefore, bureaucrats are not to blame for the challenges that clients experience in accessing public services. The bureaucrats' behavior is shaped by professionalism, their broader work environment, training, education. Preliminary and missing knowledge is weighed in every decision-process they make. Therefore, they're not only affected by their personal beliefs (Ibid.:10). Lipsky's (2010) statement is a critical turn in acknowledging the work of street-level bureaucrats as evidence-based. Therefore, it's also essential to remember this acknowledgment when one is exploring social workers' discretionary behavior related to the use of digital tools in The Job Center.

The social workers commonly use discretionary power within their role and preliminary knowledge of similar cases to respond to the particular needs of a client. At the same time, they are put under pressure by inadequate resources, vague or conflicting organizational expectations, policy reforms, time constraints, deadlines, or other missing resources, constraining them from responding to each case adequately (Lipsky, M. 2010:14). Evans (2004:7) note that the street-level bureaucrats manage their role by modifying their routines of practices:

The ways of organizing their work, modifications of how they understand their jobs, modifications of how to use technological tools in different ways, and interpretation of the legislation (Ibid.:7).

The mix of influencing factors plays out in different ways in various institutions. The individual routines change the way the social worker facilitates her job (Gilson, L. 2015:11)—conserving resources into different cases. Thus, she perceives and facilitate tasks that require more attention at a specific time (Lipsky. 2010:12). In The Job Center, with key features as a stressed work environment and limited time for each case, there is often a need to establish strategic ways of managing the consequences of routine practices. These ‘facilitation ways’ are the essence of what my study observes through the social workers’ behavior. Ultimately:

The decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out” (Busch, P. 2019:30).

5.2 Discretion

One way of describing the process facilitated by the social worker is that policy reforms are introduced as guidelines in The Job Center that inform social workers about the background and goals (Ibid.:31). Social workers are an essential actor in this aspect because *they choose* how to interpret policy reforms and can potentially challenge the way these reforms were supposed to work in practice with their discretionary space due to their professional status and given space.

As previously stated, the social work profession has a strong political character because of the cross pressure constrains it carries from policy reforms, legislation, efficiency expectations within the organizational framework, and the social workers own professionalism and altruistic aspirations. Lipsky (2010:15) describes how the discretionary space is used differently. On the one hand, because policy goals are often not clearly stated and not finalized before they are introduced on the

street-level. On the other hand, in pursuing policy goals, social workers are expected to be aware of their organizational and economic framework, constraints, and their decision-making process in complex client cases that cannot be predicted (Gilson, L. 2015:4).

Lipsky's (2010) contribution to the understanding of how social workers' discretionary practices are patterned, and not just biased behavior is vital for my study. Thus, the confirmation of discretion as an evidence-based action serves as a support for the professionalism of the role and reduces the previous thoughts of discretionary practice as illegitimate personal actions. He (Ibid.:2010) confirms that the exercise of discretion is no longer seen as a random act. Therefore, it can no longer fully demean the social work profession on the street and the screen-level. In cases where social workers are using digital tools, but established rules do not yet capture the complexity of a situation, the motivation behind the choices is still to exploit the best ethical outcome for the client while working within the given legislative framework. This opens up for complex actions.

Human agency, advocacy, and altruism are vital influences not only in how policy is implemented but also in what policy becomes when we observe and introduce it on the ground (Ibid.:72).

Ultimately, the reality of discretionary behavior is a complex process. When policy reforms are created on a top-level, they have one aim. However, when the policy is introduced on street-level, it is unrealistic to expect homogeneity because of the impact from the interpretative dimension, the constraints, and the altruistic human aspect of the social worker's reality (Gilson, L. 2015:5).

Discretion can be defined as the decision-making process where the individual bureaucrat has a freedom *and* responsibility within the constraints of legislation and rules *to act or not to act* on a given request within a case (Ibid.:13). Discretion can be used in different ways and can be seen as either an active choice or a coping mechanism, given the context. Social workers with different experiences use discretionary space differently, given their understanding of a case or lack of training in using the digital tools (Svensson et al. 2009:11). In my study, the differences are illustrated by the social worker choices of *not to act or to act*; for example, because of missing communication from managers or their level of training in the digital tools. To repeat, the discretionary exercise is no longer seen as a random action. However, the social workers' individual choices may still differ and lead to different discretionary acts, not because of their attitudes but because of their education, level of professionalism, and interpretation of guidelines. Also, The Job Center managers may communicate the policy guidelines differently (Busch, P. 2019:32).

5.3 Decision-making within Discretion

To act and perform discretion can be done differently. To act is either *an active choice* or a decision *not to act upon a given case*. Svensson et al. (2009) talk about: '*Operational discretion in social work*.' In this case, they draw on Max Weber's four forms of decision-making, which is exciting to use in combination with the theory of street-level bureaucracy. It can be used to show how specific actions within the social worker's discretion once were *goal-rational actions*. This type of action is where the social worker decides actively if action should be taken or not. Later, when digital tools are introduced, this action turns into a *traditional action*, which is not an action the social worker is fully conscious about. Thus, she automatically acts and does not think of the different dimensions anymore if she had the correct training. It is a decision that is becoming an unreflective habit and a routine, and it is an outcome of policy reforms that shape the social workers task. This is where she may become aware that her role and actions are changing from street-level actions into a screen-level action (Ibid.:14). Thus, this is a process that can feel alienating because of the missing human dimension. Finally, these types of actions can also be reversed when the digital tools are introduced and, therefore, suddenly become a time-consuming and stressful action because the element of active choices is unfamiliar and is suddenly present in the social worker's discretionary space, again.

5.4 From Street to Screen-level in The Job Center

Including the screen-level bureaucracy concept (Buffat et al., 2016) in the original street-level bureaucracy theory, offers an understanding of how the social worker's discretionary actions are being affected, and changed in new ways (Ibid.:14), when the introduction of digital tools in The Job Center is happening. When social workers begin to work with the digital tools on a screen-level, the new routines require that she still needs to act within her discretionary space. The screen-level itself should, with the correct and clear communication, offer a space where she effectively within her routines and with given training, can exercise traditional actions, and doesn't need much reflection. However, the miscommunication of how and why to use the digital tools provokes the social worker *to choose not to act* when she is using the digital tools. Thus, the discretion becomes a coping mechanism to get everything done within a deadline, because the actions that should have been a habit becomes a stress-full goal rational action.

The missing clarification leads to choices of *not to act* as a discretionary coping-mechanisms. This introduces new cautions where the clients' legal rights aren't secured because of misuse of the

tools. Also, that portrays the social worker as resistant towards changes, which is followed by misunderstandings of how important the order of a process is. Again, this leads to a misuse of a digital tool and mutual mistrust between managers and social workers that could have been avoided with clearer guidelines. As a result, the social worker may feel more like a screen-level than a street-level bureaucrat. She is becoming more aware of her altruistic client-oriented mindset (Ibid.:13) that seems to become secondary in tasks carried out with digital tools where she doesn't understand the aim. Instead of letting the digital tools help her, she uses her discretionary power to cope with her missing training and new frustration (Gilson, L. 2015:3). It creates a new dimension of frustration, providing her with less space for professional altruism in her work. Therefore, she may feel alienated because of the human aspect seem to become secondary to the shift towards screen-level actions.

The introduction of digital tools is aimed at making the operation of The Job Centers handling many client cases at the same time more efficient and secure¹⁰. The processing of clients can become much faster and requires less paperwork because of the *active* employment legislation introduced in 2011 (Ejersbo, N. & Greve, C., 2014:209). With the implementation of digital tools, one might assume that discretionary biases and individual discretionary actions no longer play a role in the practice because of the 'easy' guidelines. However, Evans (2004) argues that this is not the case. Digital tools still add another layer to the discretionary practice that is accompanied by unique needs for new clarification of guidelines to unify policy aim with practice. Otherwise, the social workers will start to misuse not the tools, but their discretionary space. Because of misunderstandings, those *goal-rationalized* actions will shape the use of the tools negatively. The tools will be used as a constraint against the clients, and as a stress factor for the social workers.

Street-level bureaucrats have evolved into tomorrow's screen-level bureaucrats. They are now not only busy handling the human aspect but also stressed about how to use the digital tools, which means only partial interaction with clients (Busch, A.201:19). Furthermore, actions generated by the use of digital tools should enhance the ability of the social worker to make the right ethical decisions in a routinized and effective way, because of the clear choice officiated by the digital tools. However, digital tools are updated all the time, and the usage and context may not be precise.

¹⁰ The idea of efficient client processing is based on the idea from Lipsky (2010) and adopted by Liljegren, A., Parding, K. (2010:270)

Therefore, the coping decisions she acts on, using the tools are subject to managerial concerns regarding risk and complex security questions, that needs to be handled according to Hardy (2020):

Changes in the extent and capabilities of technologies within the public sector hold significant potential (as well as possible pitfalls) to enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of professional's discretionary power and decision making (Ibid.:41).

To conclude, this section has reviewed three critical aspects of street-level bureaucracy theory: firstly, the role of the street-level bureaucrat in The Job Center. Secondly, the process of making decisions within a discretionary space and the social workers role being transformed into a screen-level. To understand how the critical role of the social worker is both being impacted and is impacting the use of digital tools, the concept of discretion has been introduced together with the understanding of how the social worker's discretionary choices are affected differently when the digital tools are being introduced in The Job Center. To create a more nuanced understanding of the social workers' modification and facilitating the process, it's essential to understand the political framework that is impacting the social workers' profession together with their expectations. Finally, the screen-level concept argues that job centers and the social workers that the human organization is built upon have been affected by the introduction of digital tools. Therefore, the discretion concept is being both expanded and constrained depending on how the digital tools are used through actions and introduced by managers.

Chapter 6: Methodology

6.1 An Ontological or Epistemological perspective

Any research design is based on a set of philosophical assumptions that guide the researcher. Reflections on the base of knowledge must be made by me as the researcher, preliminarily to understand and define why and how to study the chosen research question (della Porta, D., 2019:19-20). I stress that it's possible to enter a field with not only one truth, and therefore I need to be aware of the different approaches and how they can be combined in my study (Ibid.:20). In science, the two main competing perspectives, *ontology and epistemology*, are used to describe how researchers study the world. Furthermore, the intellectual puzzles, then, will contain different sets of ontological or epistemological assumptions that may suggest distinctive types of social explanations (Mason, J. 2012:19). The ontological perspective is concerned with understanding the existence of the real and objective world. The epistemological perspective is concerned with understanding the

possibility of knowing this world and the forms this knowledge would take in it (della Porta, D., 2019:20). This research positions itself within an epistemological perspective, because the aims are to understand discretionary behavior in ‘the world’, by observing the chosen setting. Therefore, this research is not concerned whether the particular existence of discretion is real or not. Thus, these observations cannot be explained entirely through ontology since the research isn’t concerned if discretionary space itself, e.g., exists.

The scientific discoveries of this research are collected as experiences from the chosen sampling group. Epistemology is chosen because it’s impossible to understand the sampling group’s social behavior without looking at the individual social workers perceptions of the world. I believe that the understanding of the social world is that; The Job Center is a product of the complex web of social interactions created by policy reforms, legislative rules, and digital tools, where the social worker in The Job Center exercise discretion both in a digital space and on the frontline.

The idea behind using an interpretive approach combined with epistemology is that it will help to add in-depth understanding about the connection between the social worker and their way of facilitating their discretionary space when they use digital tools. The approach is particularly helpful in discovering the meanings human beings attribute to their discretionary behavior through their behavior and the effort they put into a task because of their professionalism, in a specific context¹¹. More specifically, following Weber, this research aims at understanding the motivations that lie behind human behavior. The interpretive approach seeks explanations for social behavior that does not derive from universal rules. Instead, the explanations arise from the observation and interpretations of people’s motives for their actions.

6.2 Deductive & Inductive approach

The chosen epistemology and aim of seeking to understand discretionary behavior through the eyes of the sampling group is related to interpretivism. The inductive approach, the *findings and data-collection will happen first through observing*. One of the key concepts within the inductive approach that describes the data gathering process of this study is: ‘*The iterative strategy*’ (Bryman, A. 2016:23). The strategy is described as the researcher going back and forth between collecting data and looking at a theory that emerges from observations. It can be understood as a:

¹¹ The concept context, is considered, important since this research on human behavior, must consider the individual’s situational context. In this research, the chosen context is The Job Center (Della Porta, D. 2019:28).

Weaving back and forth between data and theory (Ibid.:23).

The strategy has been a metaphorical picture of how the data collection has happened throughout my study. However, the empirical data collection can have either a theory testing or a theory-building approach. A deductive strategy is linked to the theory-testing data, taking its point of departure in theory or "real-world model", testing whether they can be confirmed in the empirical data or not (Ibid.:24). Contrary, the theory-building approach is related to the inductive approach, where the research:

Enters the field without having too many preconceived ideas to test, but rather will let the empirical world decide which questions are worth seeking to answer (Kvale, S., Brinkman, S., 2015:72).

It's important to note that in most research processes it's rarely 'black or white' but rather a mixture of both strategies, as described by Bryman (2016:24). Still, I argue that this research is not theory-testing, but theory-building, since the key concepts and theory were not precisely formulated from the beginning, but were allowed to grow from the data collection and analysis as a '*weaving back and forth*.' During the data collecting process, I have become aware of particular patterns that shaped the theory¹² of the research. The concepts emerging from the theory became necessary for further data-collecting, which has resulted in the analytical approach where I have been 'switching' between the two positions: studying theory and at data (Ibid.:27). Finally, in practice, the process of working inductively or deductively can be more 'floating' (Ibid.:27). Still, I argue that this research is built on an inductive approach from the beginning, both according to the chosen methodology and way of collecting data in the field.

6.3 The Researcher's Position

To enter The Job Center arena as a neutral researcher will, in this research, conflict with preliminary position and gained knowledge in the field, and the same sampling group with which I have worked for the last four years. However, understanding and interpreting the sampling-group's ways of behaving from a new position, I argue that a hermeneutic understanding is fruitful for broadening my understanding and way of interpreting my observations (della Porta, D. 2019:26). It is crucial when I am analyzing social workers' statements and behavior to be aware of my prior understandings of the group that has been shaped previously regarding the same individuals.

¹² The chose theory as mentioned earlier is based on Michael Lipsky: Street-Level Bureaucracy. Discretionary power and screen-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, M. 2010).

Therefore, it has become a crucial focus point when I previously have entered the field in a different context and role. On the one hand, it could make the researcher biased. On the other hand, it's essential to be aware of these preliminary understandings beforehand and to know how to use the knowledge to my advantage both in the data collection process and when analyzing the findings. It's also important to be 'open' to the fact that new concepts and theories concerning the sampling group might emerge during the data collection. That may happen when I enter the same field but in a research position. It will be essential to be able to *not* 'go native' (Bryman, A. 2016) and allow myself to stay in the researcher position when I observe and to be a social worker, when I need to work.

6.4 The Hermeneutics

In line with the inductive approach and the researcher's position, interpretation works at two different levels (della Porta, D. 2019:27). All individuals interpret from their own understanding, including me, and sampling group, therefore it's relevant to use hermeneutics in this research combined with the inductive approach as the knowledge base.

The world can be understood not as an objective reality, but as a subjective series of interpretations that the sampling-group within The Job Center adds to their context and role; the researcher then interprets their interpretations. On further reflection, the researcher's interpretations return to the sampling group through literature and technology, influencing them, again. This is also called the 'double hermeneutic' (Juil, S. 2012:109).

Founded by Gadamer, hermeneutics is the theory of understanding the whole individual (Ibid.: 109). For me, that means to understand from a position only I can be in, both by interpreting my colleagues and knowing how they act because of my preliminary knowledge of their behavior that I have been around for four years. Now I am, as a researcher, adding another dimension, where I see them as a sampling group for this particular research¹³.

Through ethnography I observe the sampling group. Those observations will be analyzed to help answer the research question. I argue that Juil's (2012) statement drawing on Max Weber's

¹³ Several researchers are skeptical about hermeneutics and argue that it is not safe and objective, and therefore believe that hermeneutics is not a theory of science because it continuously analyzes and interprets (Juil, S. 2012:109)

thoughts, regarding the use of hermeneutics to understand the actions of individuals, align with the approach I have chosen to understand the sampling group:

Weber attaches crucial importance to the individual's values and moods for their actions. The task of science is to explain these, but if it's to be possible, the researcher must first familiarize himself with and understand the values and settings underlying them. In other words, by examining the purpose of the actors' actions, it is possible to gain insight into their behavioral causes (Ibid.:19).

Finally, by interpreting the collected data (Kjørup, S. 2003:74-76), I gain an understanding of the sampling groups' behavior and possible actions of why they use their discretionary power in a different way concerning digital tools. As earlier mentioned, I am not neutral, but bring my previous understanding into the interpretation process (Juul, S. 2012:121). That is not a problem, because it is these understandings that enable me to ask the relevant questions to myself, reflect and gain new knowledge, in the process of understanding and 'old' context from a new position (Ibid.:122).

Chapter 7: Research Method

7.1 Reflections on the Choice of Method

The chosen method for this research has the design of a qualitative ethnographic case study (Bryman, A. 2016:60). Qualitative research is characteristically: *exploratory, fluid, flexible, data-driven & context-sensitive* (Mason, J., 2018:24). Thus, it links well to this research aim of exploring how social workers use their discretion and facilitate the use of digital tools in The Job Center. Also, the method choice rarely emerges from a neutral stand-point; in this research, the method has emerged because of me already being placed in the specific case context beforehand.

When I became aware of how to use the ethnographic method combined with participatory observations, it was the obvious choice when I wanted to research the real-life behavior of my colleagues. The data may never have emerged if I had only used qualitative semi-structured interviews or some form of quantitative questionnaires.

This research, while positioned in the qualitative methods field can, at the same time, have a case study design, while being an ethnographic study. Case studies often favor methods such as participant observation and unstructured interviewing (Bryman, A. 2016:69). These methods are particularly useful when I have chosen to examine behavior and observation. This leads us to specify the ethnographic method and how to use it.

7.2 Ethnographic research – a qualitative method

The ethnographic research approach is helpful in exposing essential consistent behavior in everyday activities. Lipsky's (2010) theory stresses that what happens on the ground will become the policies implemented:

The decisions, the routines they establish and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressure effectively becomes the public policy they carry out (Buffat et al., 2016:9).

Hence, when I use ethnography together with Lipsky's theory, there is no alternative to being '*on the spot*' and observing bureaucrats in practice to capture how they exercise their discretionary power within the digital space. This is for example, through observing them: *Voicing their opinion, asking for help, being stressed because of time constraints or missing training, complaining at lunchbreaks, loop holing through guidelines or organizing client meetings*, as Buffat (2016) previously has done (Ibid.:8). Hence, this research will be on '*that spot*' when exploring the behavior of the bureaucrats. It's important to point out that because of the inductive approach, these observations haven't beforehand been placed within criteria's since I first needed to observe the different patterns that emerged from the field.

7.3 The context and Job Center setting

During the analysis and data collection process, the research takes a standpoint to use hermeneutics. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the importance of the setting and context as this study interprets the statements of the sampling group in a specific context. The reason why context is vital for this ethnographic study, is because the significance can only be understood where the social workers as subjects provide context-sensitive details, where the social workers discretionary behavior takes place (Bryman, A. 2016:401).

It is essential for me as a receiver of statements, from my position, to interpret the information and tie it to the context. I first observed the sampling-group and wrote down their statements and my interpretation of those. A hermeneutic interpretation is an interpretation of emotions, statements, culture, and experiences that are tied to the context of particular cases and The Job Center (Ibid.:401). Therefore, it is crucial in this particular context to understand that this is soft data because there is no single truth. Perceptions of the world of the 'job center' are individual.

Throughout my ethnographic research that took place over three months¹⁴, I was a part of the social worker team in The Job Center. I was a part of the everyday staff as a social worker, in my real life. The Job Center will remain mentioned as ‘The Job Center’ without further specifics, to protect the anonymity of the institution and the social workers—who are also my friends. I had already gained the trust of the other social workers since they were my colleagues. Therefore, I quickly blended in, also because of my natural position as the ‘go to-helper’ when digital dilemmas were indeed too time-consuming for others to handle when they had short deadlines.

Another critical reflection in line with the context is the role of being a *passive or active* member (Ibid.:438). In my social worker role using the same tools as my colleagues, my role becomes active, and I engaged in the same activity as everyone else. I found myself being frustrated and needed to take the high ‘road’ in choices involving time constraints while using digital tools. I earlier wasn’t fully aware of how my behavior concerning digital tools was shaped in that exact context. Therefore, during the research, it became essential for me to, to not only either focus on collecting the ‘bad’ stories or the ‘good’ stories, which I drawn towards, because of my personal opinion regarding the tools. I needed to collect *everything* that could be used for expanding and creating a better understanding to answer the research question

7.4 Ann added dimension

Ethnographers are able to observe the ways in which events develop over time or the ways in which the different elements of a social system (values, behavior) interconnect (Bryman, A. 2012:395).

This study used participatory observational techniques combined with autoethnographic observations to provide an added dimension to the case study (Ibid.:439). I argue that without this particular qualitative method, it wouldn’t have been possible to capture the real attitudes and thereof behavior of the individual social worker. For example, the conversations in lunchbreaks would not have been a part of the study, if I had used qualitative interviews, only.

Furthermore, ethnography focusing on studying an organizations’ work processes, behavior, and social life in order to see how they are coordinated within a discourse has always been of interest to researchers (Kyed, M. & Pedersen, O., 2018:175). Work processes are a part of social life, and organizational ethnography can be seen as a way to study untold interaction and social relationships

¹⁴ Initially it was five months. The reason for the shortened period will be addressed in the final conclusion.

that influence everyday work practices. In this study, the observed experiences are crucial to the knowledge of how social relations and behavior in everyday work practice are tied together and, therefore, can be related to the ruling relations of the society.

This kind of ethnography has a unique value in contributing to the knowledge and visibility of overlooked elements in the daily work that takes place in the organizations—in this study, how the digital tools are used by the social workers and facilitated through their discretionary space (Ibid.:175). These elements change actions into ‘standardized’ structures of organizational action, without anyone noticing. Thus, the aim of using this method is to understand the meaning of digital discretionary processes in The Job Center by using the untold experiences that could not have been observed without this dimension.

7.5 Open & Closed Settings

Typically, one of the most significant and challenging steps is ‘*gaining accesses*’ to the field when one is using ethnography (Bryman, A. 2016:427-28). It is noteworthy to point out that the distinction between open and closed settings is never hard but rather fluent (Ibid.:427). This study is the exception to the rule. In this setting, as a researcher gaining access to the specific Job Center, the setting would for others be observed as a closed setting. Nevertheless, through my position and the fact that I was at the starting point, already an employee, this particular setting gave me an ‘easy accesses’ to the sampling group. Therefore, the setting itself becomes *an open setting* for me (Ibid.:427). I am aware of the advantage this has had, where I have had ongoing access (Ibid.:430) and nobody has questioned my presence in meetings, interviews, coffee discussions, trainings, or lunch breaks. Furthermore, I want to highlight that the interpretivist will tend to immerse herself in the situation to be studied, to empathize with the sampling group and to see things from their perspective, and that is the core of both my chosen setting, my role and my chosen method, tied together. Therefore, through my role, I created a space where I, from the beginning, couldn’t only observe from the outside, but became an insider of the setting. It would have been more unusual if I started not to engage in conversations.

7.6 Covert & Overt Role:

“It’s a matter of degree” (Bryman, A. 2016:425).

Being *covert* in The Job Center, the research might reveal some aspects of their true identity. This has been one of many reflections, when I entered this field in a covert role instead of entering it, as I have previously done for four years, as a social worker. I was already a *full member* of the field from the very beginning, but after I chose to study the behavior of the sampling group, I entered a stage of *full covert member, but with the same group*. However, to a degree, the change only happened in my mind. However, the sampling group were aware of me conducting a study and the more prominent topic of this study but while they knew this:

“They were never afraid of voicing their opinions in my presence,” but contrary, they might never have been aware of how I went home after work, and took field notes of our conversations” and “They trusted me.” (Researcher’s fieldnote)

I was the only one that knew how I shifted between being covert and a social worker. I was the only one to question my intentions with the question I threw out over a lunch break. One of my reflections was that, on the one hand, they would have been okay with them anonymously explaining how they felt in an interview. However, I am aware of how the dynamics would have switched the second I asked for an interview. They would become self-conscious about right and wrong answers.

Covert was a position I from the beginning chose to put myself in. I understood that if the statements of the social workers I observed should be authentic, they couldn’t know that I was undercover. With a structured interview guide, qualitative interviews, or a quantitative survey, those participatory observations of behavior would possibly never have been fully discovered with them becoming aware of me observing their position and statements. Each role carries its own risk and advantages (Bryman, A. 2016:425. *The covert role*, where I simply enter the change of state, only in my mind, offers me the opportunity to get close to individuals and thereby gain a more complete and intense understanding of their attitudes, narrative and values, despite my preliminary understanding of them (Ibid.:425-26). I was, from the beginning, aware that not everyone has the opportunity to be a *full covert member*, without any possible dangerous consequences like I had. However, I still considered to what extent it was the correct ethical choice, because of some of the opposing attitudes the sampling-group exposed to me. I questioned if my own or my colleagues’ position would be at risk or if my colleagues would recognize themselves if they read this study. Finally, I argue that to answer my research question, it required me to put myself in this covert role, for an intensive examination of this particular complex social context and research question.

7.7 Research Tools

Ethnography is open and exploratory of character. For this research, I used the following tools: I *read* the guidelines given to me for handling ‘safe online behavior’ to capture the aspects of interaction and behavior compared to guidelines. I *participated* in the daily institutional life. I *engaged in observing* how the individual social workers spoke about using the digital tools and contrary how they were using them. I *also observed* how the managers and employees interpreted the legislation—how they proposed ideas and guidelines for ‘how they should be used’ and ‘how they shouldn’t be used’, contrary to how the social workers and I actually used them. I *collected* the individual’s stories when they were talking to each other. I *talked* to them about their frustrations, their happiness of success, their procrastination, and their willingness to hand over tasks, in need of more time in order to finish the long list of digital administrative tasks. I *documented and wrote down* the constructive and destructive elements of how the communication and discretion let the social worker use the digital tools in different ways in their everyday work.

This helped me to gain a new perspective of the specific institutional context and made me build even stronger bonds to my colleagues. I *understood* their background and experience in another dimension than earlier. I also *increased my presence* in events more than usual—specifically, in events with topics such as “How to use digital tools & data protection” in order to understand the different behaviors better and to *observe who attended*.

Finally, I did not conduct planned interviews at any point in the research. After observing for about one month, I knew better with whom I wanted to speak more and who have had training, and access to digital tools. In that way I could better for the next two months insert myself in settings where the targeted sampling-group were present.

7.8 Participant Observation

Participant observations (Bryman, A. 2016:423) constitute the most significant part of my empirical data in this thesis. Observations have allowed me to capture how people have facilitated and behaved within the setting, in a natural way. As I have argued earlier, opposed to interviews or survey research, participant observations have the great advantage of offering unexpected details to events in social dynamics that an interview cannot offer. An obvious solution is to observe people’s behavior directly rather than to rely on research instruments like questionnaires. Interviews are an essential tool to explore people’s points of view and let them own it. Still, to better understand the

institutional context of The Job Center as a whole and its social processes, the interview would not be enough. Work practices such as discretion are contextualized, and therefore people often cannot articulate why they do what they do' for the same reason there is a need for time to let these patterns that people use emerge.

Observations provide this research with detailed information on how the digital discretionary space is arranged and how individuals communicate in this space. For example, observation offer an insight into what the social workers may speak about behind closed doors. Because of my position, I can observe their non-verbal gestures they use to communicate and discussing the digital tools (e.g., smiling, showing frustration, anger).

In addition to the advantages of observing, participant observations bring specific contributions and limitations to the research process. By becoming a 'participant' of the setting, I arguably interfere less with the natural setting, and by being a part of the natural environment, that allows me to understand the context of people's behavior to be mapped out fully (Ibid.:494).

Furthermore, because of the unstructured nature of participant observation, it is more likely to uncover unexpected issues. For example, the observations of my own feelings, where I almost was 'going native'¹⁵ (Ibid.:439), can be dangerous, but can present an important additional layer to create understandings in this thesis. When I was participating in organizational life in The Job Center, I did not only observe what happened as a robot, but because of my attachment to the place, I felt how feelings ran high and low when times were stressed or when people experienced pressure. Interactions and feelings also impacted me emotionally. I recall a situation when:

I just had been in training for several hours. I was taught how to use a digital tool for a secure way of sending mail. It should secure the client from us leaking data. When I came back from training, I swore to never use the other tools again and to be the 'front figure' of new and better security. I was also tired, and it started to be hard to remember what I was just taught. There I found myself disobeying and using an unsecured tool to send someone an e-mail. Well why. Because I could. I was in charge. And it was easier (Researcher's fieldnote).

In this situation, I had suddenly become more aware of managers' and social workers' ways of shaping the policy at the frontline versus policy expectations. Going native (Bryman, A. 2016:439) is a potential problem because I could lose sight of my researcher position and go back to being a

¹⁵The concept 'going native' is taken from Bryman's and describe that the researcher is losing track of the structure of the research because of the depth and how she is too involved.

social worker. And therefore, finding it challenging to develop a social scientific angle on the collection and analysis of data because of their own emotions taking over. But in this case, it helped to develop another layer of understanding.

7.9 Fieldnotes

I want the reader to understand how my material data has been organized after the observations. I find this important to document for the sake of trustworthiness (Bryman, A. 2016:697), to strengthen the beliefs of my findings and show how I have documented my observations.

When I consider the discretionary power that has been given to me in my position, I am aware that when I was writing the field notes, the process has been extremely easy for me. This was because of the ‘freedom’ that was given to me to organize my own time within the position. I did not have to hide to write down my observations.

It’s considered ‘normal’ within the context of The Job Center and not remarkable if social workers take notes in meetings. Also, most social workers in The Job Center carry around some sort of notebook or laptop used for journalizing because that is a task within the law. It’s been in my favor, and it can be seen from the way my fieldnotes will be shown in the analysis. They will have a depth, and the reason for that is that not only did I have time to thoroughly observe my colleagues, but I also have a well-based knowledge foundation about them, their position and their schedules, beforehand. This gave me an advantage while observing.

As for organizing my notes, my research started from an inductive point, where I only had a few topics and words in my mind. *Digitalization & behavior*. Therefore, my notes very fast became very long, and I didn’t have the time to write them down straight away – because of my time constraint within the discretionary power¹⁶ given to me. Sometimes a whole lunchbreak would involve that I observed people, discussing their frustrations of the topic. I began because of my time-constraints and frustration level to write down only short words, also referred to as ‘*jotted notes*’ and fill in the whole section when I was off from work, also known as ‘*full field notes*’ (Ibid.:443-44). It was a process involving a lot of – ‘*ad hoc. remembering,*’ relying on my memories from the day it happened, and that’s where the jotted notes helped to jog the memory when I came home after a long day.

¹⁶ When I mentioned discretionary power as a concept it is based on Lipsky’s concept of discretion (Lipsky, M. 2010)

To some extent, strategies for taking field notes will be affected by the degree to which the ethnographer enters the field with clearly delineated research questions (Ibid.:443). For this research, that happened gradually as a process while being in the field, which is why also the fieldnotes have been starting from a broad topic and narrowed down over time and then widen again, as the research question and intellectual puzzle became clearer. In the end, the fieldnotes have been sorted into patterns to create an understand of the findings, and after that in the data analysis, been sorted into themes. These different themes in the data analysis are built as a history of The Job Center and portray everyday autoethnographic observations.

7.10 Thick Descriptions

This leads us to how my fieldnotes have been written. I want the reader of this research to understand my way of describing my observations and way of thinking. Therefore, I will use the concept: '*Thick description*.' It is a research technique that gives detailed descriptions of my interpretations and observed situations. It aligns with my methodology and approach described in the previous section. Thick description is a qualitative ethnographic research technique, invented to go beyond a standard description:

A thick description does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another (Denzin, N., 2011:83).

The pros of using 'thick descriptions' for me is that it will help the reader to understand a situation, remembered and only observed by the researcher. While one could argue that a quantitative analysis often fails to explain the finer nuances of behavior of individuals, many 'thin' qualitative analyses still lack interpretation. When I have chosen to use thick qualitative description, it's both to pay attention to small details of the 'digital discretionary practice' that can only be captured by me, while I simultaneously observe and interpret, to create what meaning the given situation has for answering the research question (Ibid.:2).

The cons of using thick descriptions is that they can be easily manufactured and therefore lack trustworthiness. When I am using 'thick descriptions,' the reader will have to take my word for it, and believe what I present, blindly. There is also a risk of researcher bias since everyone observes and interprets differently. In this case, there is only me who will use interpretation, and that might make it easier for the reader to get to know my 'path'.

7.11 Example of Thick Descriptions

It's still morning in The Job Center. At 09:45 a co-worker rushes into my office, she looks frustrated I can see from the way her forehead wrinkles, this is her frustration look. She asks for the it-guy, which I share the office with. He is not here. As for most days, he runs around helping people, that act confused - like this lady. She also wasn't at it-training yesterday. I ask her if I can help her with the problem, maybe – and her face lightens up. She starts to complain about how small this task is. There is a small pause where I wait for her to tell me the actual thing she need help with and not just her complaining. The laptop makes an annoying noise like a beetle. I can see how my co-worker is frustrated. She most likely has a meeting in 5 minutes, which is more important, and she doesn't strike me as the person who cares much about the digital guidelines. It's not because she doesn't want to follow the guidelines, but because she simply sees it as secondary, compared to the meeting with clients.

In line with the illustrated example, I argue that there are many different ways to write thick descriptions, and writing ethnography is, as described one of the most difficult writing processes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014:275). In this example and my fieldnotes presented in the data analysis, my interpretation will be present—for both myself and the reader to understand the different practices and facilitation process I observed. Jarzabkowski (2014) explain the process of writing ethnographic this way:

Its “truth claims” are not primarily based in what research participants have said to researchers, but rather on the researcher’s “personalized seeing, hearing, and experiencing in specific social settings (Ibid.:275)

Also, the element of interpretation can in literature be found legitimized and often used in autoethnography (Larsen. J., 2018:154). Autoethnography makes the researcher's voice stronger than in traditional ethnography. It presents the feelings, observations, and the biographical element even stronger. The pro of using the genre of ‘auto’ in my research is that the method of the description emphasizes the researcher's position and preliminary knowledge of the context. The researcher can use her self-reflection and retro-perspective knowledge about a context together with inside observations to lift the analysis, described through personal experiences, in order to understand a cultural phenomenon—in this context, the discretionary process.

Another reason for interpreting autoethnography as part of my descriptions is that this method embraces the researcher's subjective experiences. Thus, my researcher narrative and the fact that I know The Job Center in advance becomes a part of the final text. In autoethnography, one is not concerned about that the researcher misread what is being observed, but sees it as an advantage that

I, both combine research strategy, background knowledge of The Job Center colleagues and active engagement with colleagues, at the same time. Therefore, I must, as an ethnographer, continuously be aware of the way I use this background knowledge I have of a culture and the person's behavior beforehand to make the descriptions come alive.

7.12 Trustworthiness & Transferability

One question on which a great deal of discussion has centered within the field of qualitative case studies and ethnographic research concerns the external trustworthiness and generalizability of qualitative studies. In autoethnography, the researcher's central role where reflexivity is the keyword also becomes a part of the trustworthiness. The trustworthiness is secured through the thick descriptions, which is constructed as a specific story, with personal details that I, as a researcher, intimately explain to the reader (Larsen, J., 2018:155).

Ethnography, while being intimate and reflexive also represents a difficulty in generalizing to other cases or studies, based on the data collected. I am aware of that limitation. I argue that this ethnographic research has parts that can be comparative for other groups. For example, the same feelings and behavior can be reflected upon.

However, this research aims at being explorative and fluid, and therefore doesn't aim at having an outcome that can be fully transferable (Bryman, A. 2016:384). Ethnography mostly are difficult to associate with replication or transferability due to the relationships observed and created in the process of being close to the sampling-group. These relationships and observations derived from there can be impossible to replicate, even in similar settings, but might offer a form of guidance.

A delimitation of this research is that this particular case has been chosen, not because it's an extreme covert or unusual setting, but because it has a broader category of different elements that have been suitable to analyze in an everyday setting, with *open access* (Ibid.:427) for me.

Therefore, it's providing a context for the research question to be answered in an approachable way without hurting participants, breaking the law or compromising the researcher. Therefore, this setting may also to some extent allow for comparison to similar settings with the same institutional framework.

Finally, I stress that some conclusions or behaviors towards digital tools could also be comparable with other studies within another Job Center context, because of the legislation that made digital tools streamlined in Danish municipalities. However, when analyzing individual behavior towards

objects as digitalization, there might be a time limit for the findings. The findings of behavior could change because of new guidelines, further education in the field, or other context-related happenings that might make the study outdated. Also, the context of what is said and the institutional setting might be different. Therefore, outcomes may be different in a similar setting because we discuss individual subjective statements and behavior (Bryman, A. 2016:204). Thus, because the research is unstructured and is relying on the ingenuity of the researcher, it's hard to conduct precise replications because of the case studies (Ibid.:384).

7.13 Fairness & Dependability

Fairness, in this study is concerned with to what degree different individuals' viewpoints are represented (Bryman, A. 2016:386). Autoethnography has as an aim to be both understanding and humble. The researcher should be humble and treat the participants as friends, which they aim at helping. I argue that this thought of how to exercise autoethnography goes well with the fairness I aim at representing while still being in a covert role that can be controversial. One could see this study as controversial since I, to a certain extent is doing a study, observing my 'friends'. The ideal is to research *with* the group and not *on* the group. Thus, to not do a research and leave them afterward to their own. One of my reflections aligns well with that aim, because I care about my colleagues. With this research I do not only put them on the line, I put my name and position at risk, because my name is going to be on the final study (Larsen, J., 2018:155). Fairness relates to dependability. In this study dependability will not involve the participants' evaluation, and they will not be given audit to comment on the findings (Bryman, A. 2016:384). They will not be able to make interpretations and recommendations of the study before publishing it, but only able to gain the knowledge that the study has been carried out. Neither will the collected data receive an evaluation from the sampling group, since the research focuses on the covert observations. Still, to ensure trustworthiness, records of all the different research steps in the process are portrayed throughout this study to ensure the trustworthiness (Ibid.:384).

Chapter 8: Data collection

8.1 Narrowing down the sampling group

In this qualitative ethnographic research, the patterns observed in the field were used for purposely pattern and narrowing down the sampling groups behavior. They have been less explicit from the

beginning, due to the inductive nature of the study (Bryman, A. 2016:691). However, this particular study has focused on a critical case sampling (Ibid.:40) aiming at choosing a genre of social workers who have direct or indirect contact with clients weekly as well as use digital tools within their discretionary power in The Job Center. The study has been focusing on one particular case study, a Job Center placed on the capital of Denmark, is that I knew with almost certainty that the chosen social workers would have access to the digital tools, which is essential when observing the sampling group's behavior and finally to answer the research question. Finally, on a personal matter, it has been easier for me as the researcher to gain access to the sampling group through my job.

8.2 Sampling cases

The following patterns (8.3) have been influential both while reviewing the fieldnotes and in the data-collecting-process of the sampling cases. When I first started observing, as earlier mentioned, I didn't set up any preliminary criteria/patterns because I simply went out in the field to observe how the dynamics of my research question were happening in practices.

When I then started to review my fieldnotes and go forth a back between field and theory, it became clear that specific patterns have emerged from the observations. It became essential to sort these into different patterns, to understand what kind of people I had been observing over the three months¹⁷. For the analysis and in the context of understanding how the individual social worker understands and facilitates, the digital tools practicing them within the discretion, the following four patterns have been created as the research progressed. The research question has helped to guide the process of connecting the collected data to patterns (Bryman, A. 2016:409).

8.3 Sampling patterns

The following five patterns have been chosen after reviewing the fieldnotes because they emerged and allowed Lipsky's theory to be tested within the framework:

¹⁷ The observation period was initially five months. However, as with all ethnographic studies, one cannot be fully sure when the observations will come to an end, and if all the data is collected, as Bryman (2016) stress.

1. *Age:* The social workers observed, have a wide span of different ages. Thus, I find it interesting to understand what age group the social worker lies within. However, age is not the primary focus, but being aware if social workers at different ages has different stories to tell about the digital tools can provide depth for the analysis.
2. *Is having access to/and use digital tools:* The social workers I observed all had access to their work desk containing laptops, cellphones, e-mail, and access to the digital tools. *Access to tools* is an observed pattern that can help to gain a deeper understanding of how the social workers modify their tasks within this access.
3. *Are working full time:* The social workers observed all worked full time in The Job Center. I found it to focus on full-time employees only. I wanted to only observe full time employees to ensure that the social workers were fully attached to The Job Center five days a week, having contact with managers, and have a created a broader understanding of the work culture, legislation, and guidelines. Moreover, I wanted to be sure that they have had all the opportunities to receive the given information and training regarding digital tools and that I observed them at different times of the day and week to not draw interference regarding the context of time¹⁸.
4. *Are in a position to exercise discretionary power:* The observed social workers are all been in a position where they can exercise discretion within their given tasks. It was one of the first patterns I became aware of. Also, it's one of the most important patterns to observe because if the social workers are not in a position to exercise discretion, they're not allowed to facilitate their own tasks within the discretion.
5. *Are in contact with managers, co-workers and clients weekly:* The social workers were all in contact with managers, colleagues, and their clients weekly. Concerning the interaction between managers and colleagues, the contact and discussions happened in meetings and

¹⁸ Time as concept or timing within observation (Bryman, A. 2016:75) is important for me as an ethnographer. I must make sure that the social workers I observe are observed at different times throughout the week. If I didn't manage to pay attention to this particular pattern, I could otherwise risk drawing inferences about certain people's behavior or about events that are e.g., only valid for mornings where people are stressed before their first meetings, or at the last part of the day when people might have been tired and couldn't focus. Time and timing are, therefore, also closely related to the context.

lunchbreaks. Client interaction happened through phone, e-mail, skype meetings or interview. For me, to be able to observe how communication, facilitation, deadlines, professional values, and use of digital tools play out and differ within the individual social workers' space, this pattern has been a crucial observation.

Chapter 9: Ethical considerations

Ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in social research (Mason, J. 2012:89). This study is no exception, just because it is focusing on everyday observation. One would be foolish to state that ethical issues haven't been present in their research, only because such extremes as Rosenthal (1968) did not occur (Bryman, A. 2016:126). Thus, ethical concerns are a much more general discussion than above example (Ibid:130). Also, I argue that only if I, as a researcher, am aware of the possible ethical issues involved in my study, I can make informed decisions about the implications of confident choices. Some of those choices are the following:

9.1 Lack of Informed consent

Discussions about ethical principles in social research, and perhaps more specifically transgressions of them, tend to revolve around specific issues. One of those points appear in my research and is important to discuss: *"Is there a lack of informed consent?"*

Therefore, my main concern lies with the ethical issues that arise in relations between researchers and research participants in the course of a covert investigation (Bryman, A. 2016:129). *Covert observation* (Ibid.:425) usually involves the researcher's true identity or parts of the research remaining unknown. When there is a lack of informed consent, the participants haven't agreed to be a part of the ethnographic research. To agree with the principle means that the sampling-group of social workers, my colleagues, should be given as much information as might be needed to make their own decision about whether or not they wish to participate in the research. When I have been in a covert *position* while observing, that has been contravening the principle. The reason for that is that my colleagues do not have the chance to refuse to be observed and have their statements written down, because they are kept in a state of unawareness.

When the research only is dependent on observation, I, as a researcher, am likely to come into contact with a broad spectrum of individuals. Ensuring that absolutely everyone has the opportunity for informed consent may, in theory, be very easy, but it's not in practice. It would be extremely

disruptive in everyday contexts and intervene with the everyday life observations, if consent should be given before the observations. The problem can only be defined as when research participants change their behavior because they know they are being analyzed, that causes problems for the further observations in the study (Ibid.:129).

9.2 Transparency

Ethical trespassing is pervasive. Often it is observed that virtually all research involves elements that are at least ethically questionable. In my research, it occurred when the social workers were not informed about all the details of my research. As for this research, most of my ‘colleagues’ were only handed small pieces of knowledge about my research, if the topic came up for discussion¹⁹. What I mostly shared was my broader topic and interest in ‘how digital tools shape social work,’ without further telling about methods. This wasn’t an easy task for me. Throughout the process, I noticed that I felt like a ‘traitor’ hiding information from my colleagues. The degree of transparency also opened up for some exciting discussions on the topic. From the beginning, it was a conscious choice that I only was partly ‘honest’ in what I shared. I knew it was important for my research design to work optimally. Bryman (2016) stresses that the sampling group may try to hide their activities or attitudes about a certain topic, if they consider them undesirable to be portrayed in a study they knew were being conducted. Consequently, I chose to be less transparent to get honest data.

9.3 Confidentiality

The issue of harm to the participants is addressed in ethical codes by advocating ‘care’ as maintaining the confidentiality of records and reflect upon: “*how we should treat the people on whom we conduct the research*” (Bryman, A. 2016:121). Confidentiality means that the identities and records of individuals in the research will be maintained confidentially (Ibid:127). Injunction means that care and consideration need to be present when findings are being published to ensure that individuals are not identifiable, if their statements are problematic. The use of pseudonyms, for example, is commonly used but may not eliminate the possibility of identification because my name will be on the published study. This issue raises particular problems about the analysis of my qualitative data since it is complicated to present my fieldnotes in a way that will prevent the social

¹⁹ This process of give out small detail pieces of my research, will also be portrayed in the fieldnotes, in chapter 10.

workers and places from being identified, since I, throughout my research, mentions that this study has taken place at my work.

Therefore, some reflections regarding harm of my colleagues is:

- *The location is left as 'The Job Center' throughout the analysis.*
- *Fieldnotes do not include names or in-depth descriptions of people that would lead back to the person if their statements could in any way compromise their job or position as a social worker.*

On a second note, I argue that the statements of this study are not controversial to an extent that portrays my colleagues in a bad way. However, I mainly portray social workers that try to cope with the framework and information given to them. One must be aware that the implications of the wrong person could be interpreted negatively, and not only put my colleagues but me in a position that could be compromised. To handle that problem of a possible backlash, I decided to tell my *close* colleagues about the observations—not my managers or colleagues whose identity doesn't appear in my study or add any meaning to the particular observation, *only the closest colleagues*. After the final research analysis was done, I never asked for permission to carry out the study, and this could both compromise me as an employee and as a friend. For publishing, I could have used a cover-name, but this is not possible since this thesis needs to be published with my real name for me to receive my degree. With responsibility comes a price. I first considered that this research possibly shouldn't be uploaded to Lund's research portal to ensure the ultimate confidentiality. After recommendations, it became clear that if you choose A, you must choose B. To tell my closest colleagues was the best way to ensure that no one was harmed in the process and to not overdramatize the findings as extremely controversial, when they weren't. After all, the colleagues of mine are individuals I care about, and people who have taught me most of my professional and ethical skills. In the end, nobody refused to participate in the study and all took it with a smile. Therefore, I can confidently close this section on a peaceful note.

9.4 Leaving out an observation

Finally, in this study, I take a stand (Bryman, A. 2016:141). I wish to exclude a pattern that has been observed to a certain degree: cultural background related to religion and ethnicity. I knew from the beginning of the study that I didn't want the study's aim to be about to what extent the organizing of work and use of the discretionary power differs between individuals with different cultural or religious backgrounds and the understanding of those seen in a framework with the use

of digital tools and exercising of discretionary power. I am aware that this has excluded very few (1-2) observations from my study. Thus, this will not be present in the analysis, and it is not presented as a pattern or in any fieldnotes. Still, I think it is important to mention that I am aware, as a researcher, that social science is devoted to studying human societies and relationships within societies. Still, the negative discussion about specific ethnicities and groups has, in Denmark in recent years, been massive, with negative media coverage. I don't aim with those one or two observations to put more unwanted and unequal pressure on a specific group because of findings interpreted and observed in *one* Job Center throughout a 3-month period, where dependability, sampling-group audit, or interviews with the sampling-groups have not taken place.

If I would showcase these findings, I argue that this would put my reflexivity, transparency, and coherence up for questioning (Ibid.:393). This social researcher aims at being reflective about the implications of the ethnographic method is has been using. I aim to be methodologically self-consciousness when I am positioning myself within this context with colleagues. Just because I am in a position where I can discover particular patterns, values, and biases, it doesn't mean everything is to be used in a different context. With doing research comes responsibility to be in a position where I can make decisions about how the knowledge of the social world can be portrayed and shaped. I argue that to choose not to use this particular finding will hopefully show that I have reflected on how the chosen data entails sensitivity, to me as a researcher—both in a political and social context where I have studied the colleagues of mine.

Chapter 10: Results and Data analysis

This study is guided by one broad research question. In this section, the question is discussed with the chosen theory street-level bureaucracy by Lipsky and will be referenced through footnotes, and supported by the findings. Other theoretical reference implications will be shown directly in the text. The chapter is organized in the following way: The fieldnotes have been sorted into patterns and will be presented as different themes in six small analysis chapters. The first chapter is discussing the physical and virtual space in The Job Center and how these two different spaces support different actions and choices the social worker chooses to act on. The second chapter, 'an influential profession' discusses how the social workers' actions, professional knowledge, training, and choices shape their way of choosing how to act using digital tools. That chapter is followed by chapter three and four that discuss the way the social worker is using their discretionary space, and

how they facilitate their work with digital tools according to the discretion given to them. Chapter five is discussing the findings that focus on 'time as a resource', followed by the final chapter, six, that discuss how the different findings concerning facilitation of digital tools, ultimately, are affecting the interaction with the client.

The aim of this ethnographic research is to understand *how the individual social worker, according to her behavior, recreates, modifies and uses the digital tools within the discretionary power given to them to solve his or her tasks. Furthermore, how is this process impacting the social workers interaction with clients.*

After gathering data, a complete mapping of the different patterns that had emerged after analyzing the fieldnotes took place. These patterns have helped gain a deeper understanding of the unique context and statement. Most importantly, they have guided how to frame the findings into my 'themed' stories of how that different social workers shape, modify and facilitate the digital tools within their discretion space.

10.1 Finding: The physical & virtual space

When you first walk into the office, you do not get the feeling of being in a job center. The light is beautiful, plants and paintings are nicely decorated and placed every second meter down the hall. There are off-white sofas where clients can wait, and most of all, it looks like something from a Nordic interior magazine. Managers and social workers have their 3-4-person offices next to each other, everyone with open doors. I know for a fact that there is an open-door policy, and clients can freely enter the floor as well. There is no security, and I remember when I got hired and started here, that one of the essential values pointed out to me, was that everyone is equal in terms of position. While I walk down the halls, everyone yells good morning from their office, followed by smiles. In the cafeteria, clients who are interns, employees, managers, and people from the neighborhood can eat the meal of the day for 25 Danish kroner. The meeting rooms are all designed with a Nordic feeling, white and with wooden furniture. Not as the usual job center, dark aisles, dark leather sofas, small windows, and old. The social worker that has been in charge of the design told me that she wanted clients to feel at home when they came here. Because they might have both courses and interviews here for several weeks in a row, and she does not want them to feel uncomfortable (Fieldnote 0, 1st of April, 2020).

Different physical public settings can function in different ways and therefore contribute to either a creation of client compliance or possibly the opposite. Fieldnote zero is a perfect practice example for that ²⁰. The town hall, which is a different building, is not a part of The Job Center I have worked in, and is mainly structured to separate the social workers from the clients, with desks in the

²⁰ Theoretical concept and discussion of the physical space in bureaucratic institutions. (Lipsky, M. 2010:118).

meeting rooms, security and long hallways where everyone can see that they are here for a meeting—it gives a cold feeling. The Job Center observed, on the other hand, does not, in an original way, represent the demand for order²¹. There is no information desk or cold hallways. When clients arrive for a meeting, they may have difficulties understanding the barriers, which are supposed to represent the *order*. Like with uniforms, which is not a part of social workers' job, Lipsky (2010) states:

The settings facilitate the functioning of the bureaucracies by drawing attention to the location of power and cueing the expectations of clients (Ibid.:118.)

Ultimately, the different ways of using the physical space, either contribute to expanding or narrowing the creation of client compliance and the power structure where the social worker is using their discretionary power within this structured space. Fieldnote 0, suggests that, in The Job Center, this 'positive' way of organizing the physical space is contributing to non-separation between clients and social workers. Nevertheless, the reader of this study may question what the organization of the physical spaces has to do with the way discretion is organized digitally.

The connection is stressed in fieldnote 16. The importance lies in the way we value the clients and how we show it through the physical space in The Job Center. It is easy to feel welcomed and valued in a physical 'warm' space. The space is designed for the client and the social worker to feel at home. The point is that the clients is a valuable asset for the state and valued as people within the profession. Therefore, we provide them with comfortable chairs and cozy sofas on which to sit while waiting. We reassure them if they feel nervous that they can have a small break, or have a coffee at the machine at the *entrée*. We aim to create a positive relationship with them²². When these boundaries and equipment surroundings are translated into the virtual space, the social worker might have a harder time to set the boundaries and find the altruistic dimension in the tools; the boundaries get blurred. Who is who, and who does what? New ethical cautions are created in the virtual space. Because of the digital guidelines, the social worker is forced to work and comply with new dynamics, and the extension of her discretion is broadened where she needs to be aware of a new ethical dimension concerning her client, that was not there before. This has been observed in the following field note:

²¹ Theoretical discussion of how the space of the institutions aim at demand order (Lipsky, M. 2010:118)

²² Theoretical discussion of how the space of the institutions aim at connecting individuals (Lipsky, M., 2010:118).

We are all speaking at the same time, and there are two laptop screens open. One with the translator on, and another one with the client. It becomes a weird situation because it is the first time my client is meeting me, and she does not know which one of us is the translator and which is her counselor. Lately, we have been starting this new process in The Job Center, where we can make interviews online, and the translators are not physically allowed to be at The Job Center anymore, they should always be online. I can see and feel that it is something that creates different dynamics. There are no clear boundaries. I am still at The Job Center, in a meeting room, but the clients are at home, and for what she knows, I could also be at home in my underwear. I do not know where the translator is. It looks like she is in a kitchen, but that could not be, I think, that would not be secure for the client. All three of us are confused, and the internet connection is terrible. There is a delay in what the translator says, and I can feel that it stresses me out, I am missing out on what she translates in Zulu into Danish. I can see that the client is stressed out because we are discussing a sensitive topic. I understand. Stressed out clients is typical. Clients often choose not to have a translator because they might know each other or come from the same community, privately. Now she does not know for sure, because she can't see the translator properly and feel more insecure. Finally, we stop the interview before the time ends. I'm annoyed that it needs to be redone (Fieldnote 16. 24th of February, 2020).

This new dimension of using online translators and other digital tools also initiates new routines that need to be taught or re-learned for the social worker. In the physical space, to sit around a table and interview a client where a translator is present is a task that beforehand has been routinized and trained, and did not required much use of the social workers' discretionary power; it is *a traditional action* (Svensson et al., 2009:14)—an action where the social worker consciously does not think of how to act, acknowledge the client, where to look and how to show emotions because of previous knowledge and training in this situation. The reorganization of this task becoming digital, is a reversed action, mainly from an action which was previously *a traditional action* where rules and routines were standardized within the physical space. Through the new routine, it is an action that becomes a *goal-rational action*²³, where the social worker needs to adapt her behavior to the new digital dimension that grants a new dimension of expanded discretion. This discretionary space is accompanied by new needs where the social worker *actively* needs to choose how an interview should be carried out, as fieldnote 16 illustrates. The social worker needs to observe if the client feels comfortable with using online translators. How does the client feel—can she figure out the technology, how to use body language in this case? Many new questions arise. Therefore, the active choice of ‘completing the interview’ or not in order to acknowledge the client is either constraining or securing further standardization of the guidelines for how interviews should be done in the future, where the client still is the primary focus and not becomes secondary to the digital functions.

²³ When I mention the process of goal-rational and traditional actions it is based on Max Weber's idea, discussed by Svensson (Svensson et al., 2009:14).

To act is a crucial discretionary action, both for the client to feel and be secure, and for the social worker to promote a safe and enjoyable ethical space for the translator and herself for future use in this new space.

10.2 Finding: An influential profession

Social workers are often portrayed as having—and expected to have—a strong professional work identity²⁴ (Busch, A. 2019:166). The social workers themselves state in fieldnote 14 that information uncertainty about the use of digital tools, choice in decision importance, and case complexity makes discretion necessary in their daily practice within The Job Center. Factors such as the ability to utilize digital tools and the potential to routinize actions that previously have been a goal-rationalized action within practices can gradually change the social workers' task from taking place in real life and turn it to the screen. This can also change the social workers role and feeling of being acknowledged in her profession.

One of the patterns emerging from my data is concerned with the ambiguous relationship between the social work and the digital tools:

I recall a few colleagues of mine, as mentioned earlier, thought of the technological task as secondary to the actual practice of doing interviews with the clients because of the ambiguous goal and expectations these tools created for the social worker's job. One day a colleague of mine during the coffee break spurted out that she really could not understand what was expected of us in using these online forms. It was unknown territory for her, she said. I recall she also said something like, 'If I wanted to spend my whole day messing around with IT and sit in an office like an administrative clerk, I would have gone for a different education! I know I'm good at what I do guiding clients to make the right decisions, not the other way around'.

Others agreed with her by nodding and almost whispered that they felt the same way. In contrast, the younger ones didn't seem to see it as a problem when new procedures happen along with the regular task, and one of the younger girls suggested that she could help (Fieldnote 14. 2nd of March. 2020).

In practice, when social reforms seek to ameliorate the risk of the slow client processing and secure the client's legal certainty more effectively, as the 2011 blueprint²⁵ (Liljegren, A., Parding, K. 2010:270), these new procedures often end up discussing whether the facilitation process of social worker's behavior is adequate or not—in terms of time spent on both using and learning these digital tasks, instead of focusing on the real problem, how the task is done, as seen in the example fieldnote 14²⁶. Supported by Lipsky's (2010) argument, some tasks in the job just cannot be carried

²⁴ Lipsky throughout his book mention this about the social workers professionalism (Lipsky, M., 2010)

²⁵ The legislative reform introduced by the Ministry of Finance in 2011.

²⁶ Time as a resource mentioned briefly and introduced as a concept by Lipsky (Lipsky. 2010:6).

out correctly, given the ambiguity and complexity of goals within the technology of particular social services. The e-contracts have previously been carried out in paper form and are now required to be performed digitally, with no alternative option²⁷.

Other observations in my data that attract attention are the strong opinions and attitudes that create a feeling of ‘them and us’ when someone begins the discussion of the digital tools and e-contracts.

These observations are traced in both the fieldnote 14, and supported by fieldnote 1:

I’m in my colleague’s office. She has been working in The Job Center longer than most. She is one of the ‘old’ ones, and she was also here when I first started as an intern. She knows that I’m writing my thesis about the topic of digital tools, but she does not know how that I have been observing her and the others. Her resistance is always silent, but I know it is there, from the expression in her face when we get an e-mail now and then from the managers about how to behave towards new tasks being enforced. She breathes heavily and makes sounds like she is disappointed with everyone. She does not know, that what she might say, is what I will go home and write down after work, I feel like I want to tell her everything because she always supports me, but I hold myself back. It feels weird and wrong. She starts telling me a story of how it is interesting what I’m doing, because she was a part of an interview some years back (maybe ten years), where the interviewee asked her how digitalization impacted her job. At that point, she thought it was an odd question, and she could not really in that interview point out how it directly impacted her job, since the procedures for the new tasks were still in their start-up phase. She tells me that she was not quite aware of where this whole digital ‘wave’ would go. She says that now she cannot imagine working without these tools. The tools where we search for internships, the tools from which we hold skype meetings with translator online, the tools where we can send secured e-mails and letters way faster than the time when the letters were sent from the post office. Tools that are taken for granted but have gradually been replaced by functions that were outdated, too inefficient, or unsustainable. We need to act fast in client cases; that’s the main priority; it would not work without these tools, she says, in a way that makes it shine through that she does not like it, but she cannot fight it. She smiles and winks at me. She is like a wise grand mom (Fieldnote 1. 22nd of January, 2020).

Social workers are the face of the bureaucratic institution, often expected to be more than passive gatekeepers. They are expected to be advocates for their profession and to use their professional knowledge, education, and position to secure the quality and best treatment for the clients, within the constraints of the service and the framework given to them²⁸. They will have strong individual opinions about the topics that involve their clients and, ultimately, tools that shape the way their time is spent *away* from the primary focus—clients.

As individuals, the social worker's role mostly represents a position in between a rock and hard play. On the one hand, the role represents the clients’ hopes for fair and the most effective treatment

²⁷ Lipsky mentions the importance of ambiguous tasks and complexity of clarified goals (Lipsky. 2010:31).

²⁸ Lipsky stresses the importance of the concept advocacy within the bureaucrat profession (Lipsky. 2010:72).

by the government. At the same time, through education, the social worker is trained to have an altruistic mindset that always puts the client first. On the other hand, the same government introduces procedures and reforms that through lack of communication prevent the social worker from effectively doing their job unless those reforms are modified adequately in practice. As observed in fieldnote 1, that makes the social worker positioned to see the limitations on effective intervention and the constraints on responsiveness engendered by mass processing²⁹, but also the importance of using the digital tools to remedy these limitations³⁰. Therefore, she is put in a compromising position where she knows that she cannot work secure and effectively without the digital tool because of the big caseloads.

However, she has not chosen that the digital tools should be introduced in her daily work routine. Regardless of the aim of these tools (that tries to effectively help the social worker to handle client cases more effectively) sooner or later, at the fast pace digital tools are introduced with, can compromise her behavior and attitudes concerning the digital tools. The answer to the compromised attitudes can be found in the professionalism. Social workers tend to have a stronger identification with professionalism and this can be explained by the fact that social workers usually choose their profession before choosing which specific organization they wish to work within (Liljegren, A., Parding, K. 2010:277). This means identification with the profession started before identification with a particular work organization and hence becomes stronger.

Also, if we discuss these attitudes seen from a state perspective. The managers attempt to increase the accountability of the social workers through administrative control and routinized tasks that can be monitored digitally. It may be seen as efforts to increase the congruence between the individual social worker's behavior and the policy reforms through the use of digital tools and new guidelines available to the organization³¹. However, the preconditions of accountability found in the legislation and proper utilization of the digital tools may exist in many theoretical contexts. But, they may be hard to apply where individual social workers are concerned with different factors as the clients. To further put pressure on the social worker, in the name of improving the social worker's accountability through policy implementation (without managerial clarification) may instead

²⁹ When I mention mass processing I refer to handling multiple complex client's cases in less time, and therefore answer to several requests e.g. with the same mail answer.

³⁰ Lipsky stresses that the social worker is positioned in a place where she both can see the constraints and the importance of using a specific tool. E.g. digital tools. (Lipsky. 2010:12).

³¹ Lipsky in this section discusses how managerial procedures aim to increase the congruence between the bureaucrat and the policies implemented from a top-down perspective (Lipsky. 2010:160).

undermine rather than enhance service quality and may systematically decrease work quality ³² when the aims are not clearly stated from a managerial perspective.

When digital tools are introduced in the social worker practice it holds great potential, that is taken from the legislation. However, if it's not clarified how and why to use these tools as a part of the professional role, both the tools and the role becomes ambiguous. The ambiguity becomes clear in fieldnote 15:

“At a coffee break one afternoon, I'm asked what I'm writing about in my thesis. Some co-workers I share the office with know that I'm in the final stage of my Master's degree, and they are naturally curious if they can help or come up with good ideas. I try telling (in a relaxed and not to overexcited tone) that I write about how digitalization is impacting social work. I almost get interrupted, and I'm not surprised. The men and women working here are not afraid of voicing their opinion out loud. Also, this kind of topic always creates a heated debate, and my colleagues seem to see the whole topic very black or white. They have so many opposing opinions about this topic. They fiercely feel like the digital task is not their real job. One of my co-workers says, almost as she is ready to go to war, that no digital tools will replace her spot. Followed by the other younger women saying that she does not expect this to happen because there is still a need for the client, and social worker meetings primarily, and that cannot be replaced by a robot. They laugh and imitate to be robots (Fieldnote 15. 3rd of March, 2020).

To specify objectives for the new procedures and utilization of tasks may be likely to be instructive and guiding the individual social workers' attention to the relationship between the available resources and the goals that The Job Center is trying to achieve, e.g., *online contracts aimed at increasing safety*. However, if these guidelines are not instructive enough or lack clear goals the social workers may use their discretionary space to subvert efforts to control the task. The controlling is done effectively through social workers' actions, in the name of their accountability and professional altruism towards what they see as their primary goal. We can observe examples of attempts to increase control through digital tools. Fieldnote 15 portrays that it is relatively easy for the individual social worker to tailor her behavior so they avoid accountability or to choose the action; *not to act* upon a specific guideline. That is a common choice, if the process of training and goal is missing a degree of clarification and is hard to understand³³. Therefore, to repeat, the social worker may choose the action not to act because of a different and more clear goal within the profession—the client's needs instead of the needs of digital tools. The unfortunate thing is that if

³² Lipsky discuss how the social works accountability can undermine service quality through their choices (Lipsky. 2010:160).

³³ Lipsky notes the importance of clarification and how it can impact choices if clarification is missing in the communication (Lipsky. 2010:162).

the goal of using the digital tools was correctly clarified, the social workers would notice that these digital tools are created to secure the clients' ethical certainty. The finding and argument to *not act*, is supported by the observation in fieldnote 6:

‘It is lunch break, and I’m in one of the meeting rooms where we usually eat our lunch. One of the women, that usually works from home as much as she can – within the permission, says that she is never coming to my office to ask for help because she does not want not to be noticed. She just wants the tasks done or ignore them until they disappear so that she can do her real job. We were just joking about why we never saw her around the office. She says that she needs to complain about how slow, unhelpful and stupid the different IT-systems are, and she does not want to do that. Therefore, we never see her in our part of the office. She laughs, but I can see from the way she wrinkles her forehead, that there is a degree seriousness in the joke. I laugh and tell her that she is always welcome to share and that we are in it together. I know for a fact that our systems are not slow but just very unclear and hard to understand sometimes. I also know that she sometimes has not been around for the training. She seems like she does not care about that sort of thing. I could be wrong, but her actions imply something different (Fieldnote 6, 5th of February, 2020).

The essence and purpose of the social workers’ role becomes evident in fieldnote 6. This role requires the social worker to make decisions about other people³⁴ on behalf of both state values and social worker ethics. In The Job Center, they have been granted discretion because the nature of the service they provide to clients calls for human judgment within the ‘space’ given. We know that discretion works optimally³⁵ on the ‘street level’ because of the training through many generations, and the individuality of the cases calls for the human forum. That space can hardly be programmed and substituted fully by digital tools in the virtual ‘space’ without limiting the discretionary aspect in one way and adding a dimension of routinized tasks because it is still unknown land.

Therefore, the efforts introduced without clear goals provide a degree of accountability for the social worker. However, in practice, that does not constrain the social worker's choices and behavior of choosing how they use the digital tools. Digital systems have symbolic value. They provide control and show the concerned public and the state that The Job Center is, indeed, following the reforms. Thus, they are made to reassure that employees are accountable, even when they in practice can choose *not to act*, and therefore are using the space differently than expected³⁶.

Finally, fieldnote 10 shows that the social worker knows that to use the digital tools is the better and correct option. At the same time, there seems to be a blurred line between inducing workers to be

³⁴ The decision-making process is linked to Lipsky’s concept discretion mention several times in the book (Lipsky. 2010:162).

³⁵ The degree of ‘how optimal’ discretion works, is another discussion.

³⁶ Lipsky discussing how the accountability a control practices is created to reassure the society and government that the bureaucrats are following the rules, in theory compared to what happens in practice (Lipsky. 2010:164).

open to fewer opportunities for clients, contrarily to better get the social worker to conform fully to new reforms introduced as digital tools.

For some days, nothing noteworthy has happened. Most of my colleagues have been on holiday, and I have finally there is peace in the office. However, I observe myself being in the front of the screen the whole day. It is nothing new, but I have not quite paid attention to it before now. When I go for coffee or to the toilet or for a little walk to well, check who is here is the only time I leave my screen. My job title is a social worker, but now I more or less feel like a secretary. My tasks turn into a big pile of administrative things that need to finish digitally. I need to: send e-mail, answer emails, send secured e-letters, book the meetings, write journals, order an e-translator, order a laptop for a client, modify dates in the journals. All online. All without being in contact with anyone else but the computer. I begin to look forward to that one IRL meeting tomorrow because, for now, I feel like I am not doing anything else than being an administrative assistant. Deep down, I know these tasks need to be done for other, more enjoyable tasks to be able to occur. Alternatively, should I just do like everyone else, and skip them? (Fieldnote 10. 18th of February, 2020).

However, there are aspects in which ‘control practices’ can actively subvert the quality tasks the social work performs³⁷. One of the reasons for subverting, and for why the quality of tasks may be undermined, is found in the way the social worker's professional ethics are created. The individual social worker is responsible for making unique and appropriate responses to individual clients and assessing their situation, while not losing sight of the human aspect in decision-process. It lies in the nature of professional knowledge and in the training to become a social worker.

When there are limitations introduced as digital tools to control and monitoring to secure legal certainty gradually by The Job Center, they're mostly statutory provisions of the law or the categories of services. Clients can be assigned to these to make the process more effective.

However, the social workers I have observed at my job center have a hard time modifying and combining the new dynamics with the human service altruism³⁸. The reason for that is because it is embedded in the training and created through professionalism. They still have the responsibility and flexibility to assume that each client presents unique circumstances that may require them *to act or not to act* exercising their discretion. That dynamic opens up for a new dimension of discretion and extends the space but, at the same time, limits it (Busch, A. 2019).

If this is the case, social workers must irreducibly be accountable to the client and have an appropriate response to why they under the circumstances choose *not to exercise* their discretion when they, for example, are not sending out digital internship contracts on time.

³⁷ Control practices and how they subvert quality is based on Lipsky's concept. (Lipsky. 2010:164).

³⁸ Human Altruism, is a concept Lipsky throughout his book mentions several times related to the bureaucrat role (Lipsky. 2010.)

The considerations the social worker acts upon in each case may contradict the introduced reforms. To say that the worker should be accountable for responding to each client in a unique way appropriate to the individual case, but at the same time, should expect and learn to be adaptable towards new digital tools straight away, is to undermine and disrespect the quality of the work carried out.

If there is a missing degree of accountability because the management does not know what response they prefer (in these cases, they have not fully developed the response yet), The Job Center management cannot hold the social workers accountable for using their discretion and choosing *not to act* when using digital tools if they have not asserted a preferred response yet³⁹. Therefore, a suggested approach is usually that the social workers are normally expected to be accountable to two sources of influence: agency preferences and clients' claims. Again, it might work in theory, but the digital tools actively mitigate against flexible responses and create an expectation of routinization.

The weakness lies in the management incentives. These incentives expect the social worker to act upon conflicting goals. Also, these weak incentives contribute to an environment in which intense challenges to social workers' autonomy in decision making are presumed to have possible negative consequences for service delivery. The reason for that the incentives are undermining the social workers' discretion, morale, the reflection of ethics, and alienate social worker's initiative and professional altruism through sending mixed signals of why these tools should be used, and that creates a mistrust between managers and social workers⁴⁰.

10.3 Finding: Conditions of work & The discretionary space

Discretion is a decision-making process where the individual social worker has the freedom and responsibility within the legislation, rules, and tradition to act in a certain way or not to act on a given client case, while she is taking political, socioeconomic, and organizational conditions into account (Liljegren, A., Parding, K. 2010:273). Also, she has a significant influence within a restricted space on the street and screen-level implementation of public policies. The social

³⁹ The accountability and control practices concept, continued in this discussion (Lipsky. 2010:162-63).

⁴⁰ The control practices and management incentives contribute to intense challenges for the social workers discretionary autonomy and can have negative consequences, mentioned by Lipsky (Lipsky. 2010:162).

worker provides and shows ‘signals’ through her behavior at the frontline. Liljegren and Parding put it this way:

Discretion not only enables some professionals to ignore the needs of their clients; it also encourages many of them to ignore the needs of the organization. To many, the organization is almost incidental, a convenient place to practice their skills. They are loyal to their profession, not to the place where they happen to practice it (Ibid.:274).

The way she chooses or is forced to facilitate her behavior ultimately indicates the importance of the content she handles and the importance of a policy that aims at directing street-level behavior in a certain way. That means at the same time as the scope for action enables the client’s unique needs to be met in the best way, the range of action concerning the client's rights can be discarded (Ibid.:274). When observing this decision-making process, a clear pattern forms through various statements by the social workers in The Job Center, and lays the groundwork for this discussion. It is crucial to understand how and why the social workers sometimes perform contrary to the organization’s own goals and rules, and thereby organize and facilitate their discretion differently than expected. Through social workers we got to know how they experience the rules in the organization and what other pressures they experience.

Social workers may lack personal resources within their framework or knowledge in conducting their work. They may be undertrained or inexperienced⁴¹. Though the social worker lacks these resources, this does not mean that The Job Center:

Is prepared to abandon decisions about people and discretionary intervention wholly to digital solutions and programmed formats (Lipsky, M. 2010:19).

Two colleagues of mine confirm this idea in the following statement:

I overhear a conversation in the office next to me where the door seems left open. We occasionally try to ask others to help us with the internship contracts, and at last, they come to our office for help. One woman says to the other (about the e-contracts) that she will just stop sending them out because they are constraining her work and creates longer working hours. The other woman answers back after a long pause, asking if she can imagine working without them, how lovely it would be. I think for myself, what would happen if (the contracts), were not here, but they have always been. As long as I can remember. People just seem to forget that this is the core of the internship, and it is a change in the way of doing the task. The core of the procedure is still the same. This means they’re crucial for client’s needs to go from being unemployed to being employed again. The thought hits my mind - am I just brainwashed (Fieldnote 8. 7th of February, 2020).

⁴¹ This chapter draw on the main point from Lipsky’s concept, discretion within street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, M., 2010:31).

This statement reveals several patterns that are important to discuss. Firstly, we hear that the mindset of the colleagues implies that they see the digital facilitation as a rather unimportant task that they still need to do but that they, in theory, cannot avoid. Without concluding what that says about the particular social worker, we can notice that there is a missing clarification of what the outcome of doing or not doing this task is. Since this is a task that lays within the task of the social worker, and needs to be prioritized by the individual social worker, she decides *when* she wants to create the contract. In practice, because it is not a routinized task that she feels comfortable doing, nothing is holding her back from reorganizing the task, so she, for example, creates the contract after the internship has already started, to save herself time for essential tasks. According to the guidelines, this needs to be facilitated and done beforehand. The facilitation process implies that the clearer the goals are, and the better developed the performance measures are for the specific tool, the more finely tuned the guidance for each task can be. The less clear the goals and the less accurate the feedback of these tasks and what goals they aim to reach is, the more the individuals in a bureaucracy will be on their own and circumscribe the rules⁴². In this case, it expands a discretionary space where the social worker that has not had the proper training in the use of the program will be on her own and use the space *not to act* within her discretionary power.

Virtually all policy reforms are advocated in the name of achieving service ideals (Ibid:73). On the contrary, the profession of social work requires and assumes that the social worker, because of her advocacy and display of professional altruism, is expected to put the client's needs first in work. It is articulated explicitly throughout the social worker training—this altruistic mindset where one promotes and aims to provide the best welfare for a client. Throughout generations, the altruistic thought of putting the client first has up until now been present in the profession. However, altruism is undermined through the procedure discrepancy between the policy reform statements that do not end up matching how they are implemented in practice. It can create opposing goals, as observed in fieldnote 11:

After being off for 1,5 weeks, I notice some changes. I'm in my office, and there is nothing unusual about that itself. However, a letter appeared at my desk named GDPR (general data protection regulations), saying in headlines how we should treat personal information with confidentiality. For example, even though we all have work phones with passwords. It is now not allowed to hand out our work phone number for clients to call or our work e-mail, which has been printed on our business cards. I cannot help to hear myself complaining loud, very frustrated saying- now what? How can I

⁴² The facilitation process and clarification of goals, is mentioned extensively and refers to a discussion Lipsky also notes (Lipsky, M., 2010:65)

contact my client with a concussion who cannot look at screens?” Another colleague then yells from the back of the room that she will keep sending emails, and that she finds these changes ridiculous (Fieldnote 11. 26th of February, 2020).

The illustrated current structure (fieldnote 11) of how to handle tasks and client relations are compromising the thought of altruism and undermine advocacy. Even though it is not the goal of the new process, Lipsky states; that advocacy is incompatible with organizational perspectives (2010:73). The organization hoards resources; the social worker, through advocacy, seeks the dispersal of these to the clients. In this example, we understand the time as a resource to be used with the client. The organization imposes tight control over resources—in this case, through policy implementation of GDPR⁴³. Tight control constrains the social workers’ discretionary space and their exercise of their time as a resource to help the client. Through facilitating and seeking to utilize loopholes and discretionary provisions, the social worker aims at maximizing the client benefits.

Policy reforms and new initiatives on a policy level aims at guiding and helping The Job Center to treat all clients equally through legislation and make the client process more efficient. On an organizational level, the reforms aim at avoiding having to respond to claims that clients received special treatment that cannot be secured and backed up through legislation. Security is utilized through maximizing the use of GDPR reforms. Thus, the social worker, in this case, myself and a colleague, was especially seeking to secure the opposite of the reforms—special treatment for a client. The client could not use the new secured e-mail system, and still needed to be contacted through telephone or standard email, as illustrated in fieldnote 11. Finally, the triangular relationship between digital tools, conforming with policy reforms, and client altruism makes the social worker a judge as well as a servant. However, it is hard to do both at the same time, when the policy reforms, the guidelines, and the professionalism are opposing and do not match ⁴⁴.

The above fieldnote example also presents a dilemma in discussing the process of alienation in social work. Here, the example refers to the extent to which the social worker can express or need to suppress their human impulses through work activity. GDPR aims at maximizing the use of routinized actions of contact between social workers and clients. It aims at making the human

⁴³ *General data protection regulations*

⁴⁴ Lipsky discusses how the social worker both becomes a judge and a server, when the policy reforms have a different aim than the social worker, and these aims aren’t fully unified (Lipsky, M. 2010:73).

process more mechanical and robotic and less likely to take loopholes within legislation. The process of contacting the client this way is considered as alienating for both the social worker's decision process and the client. Tasks that require social workers to deny the essential humanity of others may also be considered alienating.

It is essential to highlight that the discretionary space given to the social workers in The Job Center is supposedly the opposite of alienating. As social workers make decisions about the product of their work and the people that they work with, they are continually confronted with the variety of humanity⁴⁵, which may be the most rewarding part of the job. Therefore, the alienating process can ultimately curtail the discretionary space and reduce the extent of how social workers respond to clients in a human way. This is likely to pressure the social worker to maximize the use of loopholes when they aim to maximize the client's resources in terms of time.

This leads us to the final example of the conditions of work within the discretionary space. This example relates to fieldnote 11, above, where the facilitation of resources inadequately related to them what is expected. Example 2 substantiates that the previous finding was not, indeed, the only time this attitude and way of facilitating a task within the discretionary space was used *to act against* implemented guidelines:

One of our female co-workers comes running into our office. This might seem dramatic, but we usually have an open-door policy on the floor. The lady starts swinging her arms and looks at me because my desk is right at the door. This might seem like a lot of my other observations, and that is correct. It happens a lot. The open-door policy and the placement of my desk makes me the receiver of many frustrations. Not because it is something that has to do with me, but because my eyes meet theirs when they enter our room. She is whispering through her front-teeth if she can put all her frustrations out on us, because she H-A-T-E-S the online systems we are using now. Then her gaze falls on the watch hanging behind me, and she disappears as fast as she came. She yells that it can wait because she has a meeting now, and that it was not **that** important. I know for a fact that it probably was quite vital if it was what I think it was. How would I know? As mentioned earlier, this is not the first time it happens, and people often show up with the same problems that they see as secondary to client interviews. In this case, it had to do with the new way of contacting clients following the guidelines from GDPR. She did not know how to do it because these new procedures are being introduced so fast. I understand her. I am not entirely sure how to do it either, and it makes me furious. It also seems like running around the table instead of going straight to the core of the problem or focus point – the client contact (Fieldnote 2, 27th of February, 2020).

⁴⁵ When Lipsky discusses altruism, he points out that the most rewarding part of the job may be to work with the verity of clients and not working with the digital tools (Lipsky, M., 2010:75).

We know now at this point in the data analysis that social workers facilitate their work with inadequate resources⁴⁶. In examples 11 and 2, the resources are time. Lack of time, combined with feeling alienated in work with little or constrained human contact to the client, can lead to dissatisfaction in the job⁴⁷. Thus, job dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with the inadequate resources which the social worker tries to cope with, can affect commitment to clients and to The Job Center they work in. The proposition that social workers in The Job Center perform to some degree in alienated labor roles contributes to our understanding of the above dynamics, which portrays the recent development of processes in The Job Center.

Also, worth discussing is the degree to which the social workers feel alienated in their work impacting their willingness to accept organizational restructuring and their acceptance of being less concerned with protecting client interests. Thus, the new GDPR guidelines that have yet to be formally introduced in The Job Center still need proper facilitation and clear guidance from a managerial standpoint. When this does not happen, it will ultimately impact social workers' connection negatively with clients, which is crucial for the job⁴⁸. This missing introduction and clarification of the importance of GDPR gives rise to alienation in work with clients. Although GDPR aims to protect the clients, it may cumulatively contribute to separating the client from the social worker and cause the social worker to decide not to act when using the new digital tools to contact clients.

10.4 Finding: The facilitation & Modification of Tasks

I'm teaching a co-worker how to send the e-insurance contract to a company (again, this is not the first time). The contracts need to be created before the internship starts. If this contract is not in place, the clients themselves could end up paying, e.g., objects they break in the internship place or if they get injured. I usually point out the importance of this contract and tell my co-workers that if they have interns at The Danish Natural Museum of History and break the skeleton of a blue whale, they will need to pay themselves. If they are at the same time injured when the skeleton hits them, we do not cover it through the municipality. It does not seem to bother people that this contract is usually made three weeks or one month later than the internship has started. These contracts used to be in paper form back in the days, and the social worker guarded them with their lives. Now they seem somehow secondary, and that frustrates me. The lady expresses that she thinks it is annoying that these contracts need to be done since they are preventing her from doing her *real job*. She emphasizes 'real'. She

⁴⁶ Inadequate resources is a concept which is based in Lipsky's concept (Lipsky, M., 2010:80).

⁴⁷ Lipsky notes, if the social worker aims at having maximized client contact, constrained human contact through digitalization of communication can lead to negative outcomes (Lipsky, M., 2010:80).

⁴⁸ When I discuss that the social workers can feel a disconnection to the clients, and alienated if there is a missing degree of clarification when new tools are introduced its base on Lipsky's discussion (Lipsky, M., 2010:80).

probably means having a meeting, which seems to overrule everything that has to do with digital work, these days (Fieldnote 7. 5th of February, 2020).

While many aspects of the social worker's tasks promote a client orientation, other parts of the job reduce commitment to the work and pressure social workers to modify the way they use the digital tools. As discussed earlier, these statements are not aimed at portraying the social workers as bad, lazy or burned individuals, or that social work is a profession that can create individuals who try to fiddle their way around the rules. My co-workers do not claim that they are doing a perfect job or performing in the optimal way. They are simply only stating that they are functioning effectively and accurately under the constraints they encounter⁴⁹.

With fieldnote 7 in mind, Lipsky notes that social workers, in general and manifestly, attempt to do a good job and have the client as their primary focus when they facilitate their tasks within a constrained framework⁵⁰. I can tell you, because of my preliminary knowledge, that this job center is not an exception. Given the missing resources in The Job Center as: *missing training in conducting e-contracts and more explicit guidance in using the digital tools provided by the managers, systems, and it-experts*, the social workers seek to simplify their tasks by making modifications within their new digital space. They use loopholes by handing these tasks to others, as experienced by me. Some of the social workers do this by narrowing their range of perceptions to better understand the information they receive and develop responses to it; for example: “*They do not know how to do this task, and they did not have the proper training*”. Otherwise, they create routines to make tasks manageable, such as handling the client and then the e-contract. They mentally simplify the objects to reduce the complexity of evaluation. They tell themselves that making this digital contract is not a critical task, contrary to the real practicalities of interviews and putting energy into helping clients. They structure their environments to make tasks and perceptions more familiar and less unique. In this case, the environments are equal to the digital system, which is unfamiliar and distanced. That they are digital and not physical makes them unfamiliar. Routines and simplifications create an understanding of the complexity. Environmental structuring limits the complexity to be managed, which in this case is the digital system and the e-contracts as they are handled as secondary or passed on to another social worker. The social workers’ reasoning of why they doing that is found in their perception. They tell themselves that they cannot handle the task

⁴⁹ When I mention constrains, it is based on earlier reflection that Lipsky has made about the bureaucrat’s constrained working conditions (Lipsky, M., 2010:81).

⁵⁰ When I mentioned constrained framework and client focus is it based on Lipsky’s concept (Lipsky. 2010:83)

and therefore it is less important. In this way, the simplification of a complicated task limits complexity⁵¹.

The development of simplifications, as mental routinization, characterizes social workers whose work involves processing the objects of bureaucratic and correct ethical attention, e.g., the client e-contracts. Lipsky notes that at the organizational level, job centers officially recognize simplifying cues, such as eligibility requirements, to regularize and be in control of decision processes.

As confirmed by this finding (fieldnote 12), the social worker develops their patterns of simplification⁵² or loop holing, when the correct way of doing a task proves inadequate for expeditious work processing, or if they significantly contradict their preferences. Simplification is a pattern which is confirmed throughout this study, where the social workers' own perception of how to do the task compared to what the guidelines say are inadequate:

The day after I got the letter about GDPR on my desk, I notice a change in all my client's journal. An automatically created letter had been sent to the clients. The topic of the letter was: 'How do we use your personal information!' The letter was a part of the increase in data regulations, which is a part of the EU regulations where all our clients need to be informed about how we use their data. This is not unusual in the sense that my colleagues and I are used to changes happening very fast, and it is a part of the job to be adaptable to changes at least in theory. In practice, with all the guidelines and clients that contact social workers through text messages, Facebook, email and a phone call at 11 in the night, it is a jungle of guidelines that are sometimes hard to choose from. What guidelines are more important to follow than others? (Fieldnote 12. 28th of February, 2020).

Also, the structure of these routines and simplifications, and the structuring of the context around which they take place, are worth considerable discussion. As observed in fieldnote 9, the social workers contextualize what is essential in the way they facilitate their tasks, ergo they "make" policy because they determine the importance of e-contracts, in the way they use them or through their digital behavior and way of advocating a use of a safe contacts form through GDPR secured networks. This leads to the following observation:

After being 'covert' in the setting of 'for a little over two months, I start to see a pattern. My colleague's behavior towards using e-contracts and other tasks hold some destructive elements. I am still considered as one of the 'helpers' or superusers, but I also have my own tasks to do. They do not disappear. The colleagues start to send me emails asking if I can do this or that and have now even started to not come to the office, but just per email ask if I can make their contracts for them. I get the

⁵¹ The social worker tries through simplifications of routines and simplifications of their perceptions to justify, why they are not acting in a proper way, when they're handling the contracts. Based on Lipsky's concept of simplifications (Lipsky, M., 2010:83).

⁵² When i mention patterns of simplifications it's based on Lipsky (Lipsky, M., 2010:83).

feeling that people assume that they can give me the task instead of doing it themselves, and do not take it seriously to learn how to do the contracts themselves. What will they do when I'm not here. Will there be no contracts made? We are still under surveillance for how the contracts are made, which means that somebody needs to do them. It's okay that it's me because I theory I could be in charge of 500 contracts, but then I would not have time to call my clients at all. I observe that the importance of these online contracts, has not taken very seriously, which now means that we are creating a lot of internships without doing the digital paperwork (Fieldnote 9. 16th of February, 2020).

When I argue that the social workers' way of facilitating and modifying their task is to not act and loop holing, I argue that their actions are political. Thus, it is to indicate that clients, business partners, managers, or social workers are aided. Some may be harmed by the dominant ways of the actions in the decision-making process⁵³. The lack of use of e-contracts and the missing understanding of the importance of GDPR is undermined by the use of critical routines like not sending out the contracts in time, not sending a digital interview invitation through secure email, or not sending out e-contracts at all.

It is one thing to say that job centers routinize the processing of work. However, when the work consists of decision-making about clients during the interaction itself, the subjects of routinization will be affected by the missing goal clarification or misunderstanding of the processing and facilitation. In the profession of social work, individuals often enter public employment with a commitment to serving the community. Yet the very nature of these occupations can prevent social workers from coming even close to the ideal conception of their jobs⁵⁴.

The observation described in fieldnote 13 suspects that if social workers have any recognition of their performance as less than adequate under the given circumstances that they are confronted with, they are likely to seek and find the explanation someplace else than in their own inadequacy because of their professional knowledge (2010:81):

The changes that have occurred lately at my job, and the observed facilitation of how people organize their time have made the managers aware of that things have not been done correctly. One day when I come to work, my furious co-worker asks me if I have seen the mail. I have not because I just arrived. She laughs and close our door, to indicate that what she is about to say, is something others shouldn't hear. She says that the other day that she and others discussed (I was not there) how ridicules it is that the managers are sitting there on their high horses in the offices and tell us how to do our job when we are doing everything we can and more. They do want us to get the proper training, take the courses, and at the same time don't take time off for the same training, but still handle 45 cases at the same time as

⁵³ When decision-making process is mentioned, it is based on Lipsky's concept (Lipsky, M. 2010:81-84).

⁵⁴ Lipsky notes that the social worker role within the framework vs. the thought of helping the individual can prevent social workers from coming close to the thought of how the work was 'thought to be' (Lipsky, M., 2010:14).

learning those digital tools in our free time. She says they are a couple of people who will bring this up for the next big meeting. In the end, I remember to that meeting the managers took it lightly. They understood the pressure and fast changes but also that it was a period with new procedures and guidelines being utilized. They are generally intensely listening, and try to make all the individual social workers in The Job Center happy. They are aware of how the group is very dynamic, with different individual forces and strengths (Fieldnote 13. 29th of February).

In the case of this job center, the explanation is found in the inadequacy of the manager's communication. The social workers find themselves flexible and hardworking within the constraints of the resources. The missing training is the reason for how they perceive and handles the problem. Ideally, by the education within the profession, the social worker is trained to respond to the individual needs or characteristics of the people they seek to help⁵⁵. Therefore, the compliance with digital tools and how they are used may be hard due to their training to respond to individual needs and not to computers. On the contrary, all jobs involve adjustments to rules, flexibility in routines of practice, challenges to keeping a fresh outlook despite repetitive or new tasks, and compromises between personal needs and vocational requirements.

Nevertheless, there are no explicit rules provided that take care of parts of the different cases; there are only guidelines. A social worker could ideally do all the e-contracts if she had the time available. Lipsky (2010:31) stresses that determining whether or not a job is "properly" done is subject to uncertainties and implicit negotiations with others; in this case the social workers could negotiate with the managers on how the job should be done, but only when explicit guidelines are yet to be implemented. Due to the task's individual aspect, the way the social worker is 'loop holing' around the task and their anger created by inadequate performance needs to be highlighted. The social workers experience their work situations as individuals and, therefore, also individual stress levels. The individuality of stress due to missing training or different sizes of task was observed daily in my office, as a social worker could storm into the office being stressed out (see fieldnote 13) while others would find it unnecessary to complain to the manager at the next center meeting. On the other side, social workers tend to reflect the psychological tendency to accept and incorporate information that is supportive of their world view and perception. They filter out information that appears contradictory to the way they want to understand the task—that is to seek

⁵⁵ Lipsky notes that the whole thought of social work is based on helping individual, and when that is challenged by introduction of digital tools it creates problems (Lipsky, M., 2010:15).

information among peers who may be expected to be like-minded⁵⁶. The reason for seeking that is to have their way of facilitating tasks confirmed as suitable.

It is observed that the managers adopt a certain approach that hardly matches the reality of The Job Center. In practice, it seems more natural to change social workers' behavior or approaches to their way of facilitating and handling the e-contracts rather than to try to modify the political system that structures the tasks⁵⁷. The importance of GDPR and e-contracts is clearly stated in the legislation of data protection regulation.

Still, a significant source of ambiguity may be found in the uncertainty of social service technologies that are implemented nowadays when there are uncertainties over what will or will not work. Then, there is a greater 'room' in the discussion for admitting and tolerating a variety of different approaches and objectives. In such a situation the managers had a willingness for discovering successful techniques and ways of approaching the task. Therefore, they had a willingness to modify objectives to suit the techniques and the social workers' attitudes⁵⁸. However, that is only temporary, as observed in fieldnote 13. Ultimately, the position of the social worker, which regularly facilitates contact with the client, permits her to make policy concerning significant aspects of her interactions with the client through discretionary actions⁵⁹. In a way, social workers implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship from citizens to the state⁶⁰, through what and how they offer the benefits and facilitate their own and the client's tasks.

10.5 Finding: The Concept of Time

Throughout the last couple of weeks, I have observed emotions that my co-workers have been expressing about the digital software application Vitas (where we send out internship e-contracts) and the digital platform we use daily for all the client contact (Fasit). I know for a fact that everyone on my floor has gotten extensive training in using these two digital platforms, because I was there myself. At least most of them were at the training. Training is not happening every time a new tool is added to the portfolio in the digital platform, and it is normally just notified by an e-mail with guidelines for usage. There is no time to take a whole day from the calendar of 250 people. Instead, there is me, and some other people who are the go-to helpers. Lately, there has been trouble in paradise, and the digital

⁵⁶ Lipsky notes that the social worker profession and the professionals use their colleagues to seek confirmation, of what they do is right, and find likeminded (Lipsky, M., 2010:114).

⁵⁷ When I stress that it may be easier to change attitudes than policy reforms it is based on Lipsky's thought (Lipsky, M., 2010:184).

⁵⁸ Willingness to modify tools and objectives is based on Lipsky's discussion (Lipsky, 2010:66).

⁵⁹ When I mention discretion, it is based in Lipsky's concept (Lipsky., 2010:13).

⁶⁰ When I mention the relationship between clients and state, it's based in Lipsky's thought of the social worker as the connection between those two (Lipsky., 2010:4).

platforms have had some software upgrade. I trace a resent within people on my floor. The social workers have been frustrated beyond their normal levels. They have stopped sending out the e-contracts because they're unsure about how it should be done, and they were using too much time doing it, when they were supposed to write reports or call mentors. The behavior led to an angry e-mail from the managers that the behavior was unacceptable. When they found out. After that, there were whispering in the corners. A silent acceptance, but a boiling frustration. What can they do, my colleagues? Quit? No, they know they are being watched. This has led to even more guidelines on how to set up and send out these contracts, and even more time spent on it. That means more time has to be devoted helping our colleagues. The individual's task is now becoming a team effort (Fieldnote 3. 1st of February. 2020).

The finding of fieldnote 3 illustrates and confirms a pattern that has been observed earlier; missing time equals a missing resource. As for other organizations, The Job Centers are always constrained by resource limitations. This is because of the cross pressure from both the state and the managers, to work within the legislation. As well as the pressure from the given economic framework, where only limited resources for each client and social worker are available. These resources are time spent on interviews, finding an internship, constructing reports, and handling an ever-growing pile of digital administrative tasks that is required to be done by social workers, to ensure that the managers can monitor their efficiency and the client's legal certainty. Within this frame, social workers must find a way to resolve the incompatible orientations toward client-centered practice on the one hand and expedient and efficient practice on the other⁶¹.

To some extent, it is essential to note that some organizations may not be afflicted by resource scarcities. However, it has become apparent that high caseloads and limited time for goal-oriented decisions, combined with the routinized task in practice, impacts the time that the individual social worker has for *active decision* making⁶². Mainly, this leads to concluding, as Lipsky (2010) stresses, that the factors that affect the work and need the most facilitation and modification time are tasks such as filling out e-contracts or modifying the e-contracts in the digital system. Digital tasks, therefore, affect the amount of time available interacting with the client.

However, as observing from fieldnotes, there were introduced more efforts on a team-level instead of the individual level to support the social worker. Team-efforts were to help the social workers, not make the e-contracts themselves. In this way, they may attend to more critical aspects of their work. However, it does not necessarily reduce the tensions associated with that specific task of making the contracts because the task is still a *goal-rational action* (Svensson et al., 2009:14),

⁶¹ The client centered practice vs. efficiency is related to Lipsky's portrayal of it (Lipsky. 2010:45).

⁶² Time as resource mentioned as a concept by Lipsky (Lipsky., 2010:29-30).

where the social worker needs to decide if that action should not be done. In the best sense, to improve the quality and gain more time, this task should, through training and change in attitudes, become a traditional action. Thus, a traditional action is an action where the social worker is not fully conscious and does the task instead of choosing not to act on it, but that also limits the space of discretion but adds space for exercising discretion in other critical cases.

Finally, it is essential to point out that every coping mechanism against the digital tools and discretionary choices taken within the space, does not distance the social worker from the goals and framework of the organization. Indeed, the best social workers are the ones who can bridge the gap and show the way for the rest. One such social workers was observed in fieldnote 5:

I am listening to a conversation one of my co-workers is having with a client. They both sound very serious. Moreover, this is not my co-workers normal 'serious' voice. I get eye contact with her, and she is nodding at me while folding her hands as if she is praying to god. That makes me confused. She is not very religious. She ends the call and come over to my desk, sighing. She said that the downside was that she had scheduled a meeting with a client who need to get an internship and that the client just called to reschedule because his wife has a brain tumor and he is in no condition to have a meeting face-to-face with anyone at the moment. This is of course very sad, even though my co-worker or I do not know this person personally, it always changes the vibe of the room for a few seconds until someone interrupts it again. Then she says, but the upside is that he wanted to have the meeting over skype or phone another day. She asks me if we are allowed to have that. For one second, my brain goes through every legislative rule that could be against it, but we use the new secure skype business at many cases. My co-worker happily adds the meeting to her calendar while she chats with herself about how smart it is that something can be done this way, under these circumstances, nowadays (Fieldnote 5, 2nd of February, 2020).

It is best to imagine a continuum of work experiences ranging from intensely stressful actions, such as creating the e-contract, working within the digital platforms, and processing clients, which is severely under-resourced. At one of the steps in the ladder, the actions that provide a reasonable balance between job requirements and successful practice will be found⁶³.

The social worker's place on that continuum might change over time as she gains experience, as illustrated by the observation in fieldnote 5. On a personal note, this specific co-worker (in fieldnote 5) has earlier been much against using the digital platforms. However, the task becomes a *traditional action*, (Svensson et al., 2009:14) as caseloads and assignments vary, or as the workplace or social worker adopts new approaches to how she should handle the digital facilitation of tasks in the future.

⁶³ Lipsky mentioning the importance of the balance between stressful and under-resourced actions and how it frames the tasks in the job (Lipsky, 2010:18).

10.6 Finding: The client interaction

Previous findings lead us to the last pattern, which is the interaction with the client. Client interaction has not been observed directly, but is an implicit part of all of the stories, all the digital platforms, all the energy used, and all statements that the social workers have made, all the stress. Ultimately, everything leads back to the client.

My fieldnotes all have one thing in common: the client aspect. They are showing a degree of frustration from the social workers' side. They implicitly tell, through their non-spoken behavior, that if they could work only with their clients, they would choose to do so.

Clients that are attending a procedure by The Job Center are non-voluntary. This point is not made evident in the statements of the social workers, but is implicit knowledge in the institution and sector. The social workers' job is to supply essential services to clients who cannot obtain these services elsewhere and, therefore, feel obligated to obey. As Lipsky (2010) notes:

Government agencies may have a monopoly on the service, clients may not be able to afford private services, or they may not have ready access to them (Ibid.:54).

Therefore, the clients are left with no other choice than to either accept or fail to reenter the labor market. In this analysis, the focus is not mainly on the client's process of reentering the labor market. However, it is important to know that most clients are left with only the option to agree to the process, no matter what it will pull them through or if their rights are secured. Being aware of that is essential for the way the social workers fulfill their tasks.

When we discuss the way, the social workers use and facilitate their tasks within the digital systems, it has a critical consequence that is left unsaid.

The choices the social worker chooses to act or not to act upon will undoubtedly mean that the clients will bear many of the costs if the individual social worker cannot meet the unpredictable demands of handling the e-contracts—let alone the unpredictable dynamic changes that create a system overload, long waiting times, rescheduled appointments, and hurried e-contracts that are not

carried out with an eye for the client's legal certainty. All these are ultimately prices that clients pay⁶⁴.

The digital tools have been incorporated to better meet the demands and secure the client's legal rights, aiming towards conditions that would better support a reconstituted public sector⁶⁵, dedicated to appropriate service and respect for clients. Given that the context in which the digital tools are introduced are changing the standards, the way the digital tools have been incorporated significantly compromises the social workers' professional altruistic view of how to process clients. The missing training makes the effectiveness and help a constraint, because the social workers haven't yet learned how to use and incorporate the tools in daily routines (Aa, P. & Van Berkel, R. 2016:264). The process diminishes the social workers' ability to treat clients holistically as individuals⁶⁶.

As observed earlier, the social workers' behavior and feelings regarding digital tools are all affecting the client's well-being. The fact that the social worker makes a significant judgment of choosing not to send the e-contracts, shows that the guidelines for how to do e-contracts are not done correctly, and there for the managerial communication is missing.

Finally, the new digital tools and guidelines may change and redefine the very nature of the professional role. The ambiguity and way to use the new guidelines for digital tools ultimately depends on how the social worker define their professionalism together with the weight of digital tools (Ibid.:264).

The anger and fury observed in my findings tell a story about how social workers depend heavily on subjective assessments of the validity of their practices. Lipsky's theory strongly supports this tendency. It suggests that the social worker can feel that the work they do is so specialized that no one else is in a position to criticize or even comment on their practices because they are not wearing their shoes⁶⁷. Their anger and frustration about the introduction of digital tools is also seen as a degree of missing trust in their profession—losing control over the professional domain,

⁶⁴ Lipsky discuss how the contact to the client and the facilitation in the end is affection the clients, mostly (Lipsky. 2010:37).

⁶⁵ Introduction of new demands (in this case digital tools) aim at support a reconstituted public sector, mentioned by Lipsky (Lipsky. 2010:199).

⁶⁶ The thought of a holistic approach is based on Lipsky (Lipsky. 2010:44). Also supported and incorporated in the active employment legislation (2011): <https://fm.dk/media/15275/Aktivbeskaeftigelsesindsats.pdf>

⁶⁷ The discussion of the professional knowledge and who is allowed to comment on others practices is based in on Lipsky's approach (Lipsky. 2010:114).

independence, decision-making and professional discretion is understandable and confirmed by Liljegren and Parding (2010:276). They draw on Evetts, and thus point out that professionalism is driven by the logic of the profession and is based on collegiality, knowledge, supported by confidence from management level, and professional ethics. Therefore, the anger is turned towards the tools or managers who do not acknowledge the professionalism, human dimension and use of the digital tools. Conclusively, the fight will not be fought for the clients but for who is in the right position to behave in a certain way because of their professional knowledge—the social workers, or managers.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

In this section I summarize my findings in a complete discussion. I start by highlighting my most critical conclusions derived from the data analysis and finished a discussion of the, final remarks that highlight the significance, contributions, and limitations of the study, as well as prospective research question.

11.1 Concluding discussion

The most prominent finding to emerge from my ethnographic data was that the social workers' discretionary space and their ways of facilitating and using it are essential factors to consider when they work with digital tools. My observations confirmed that the introduction of digital tools is shaping individual professionalism and discretion within the profession. Ultimately, that means that when the policy reforms are introduced as digital tools guidelines in The Job Center, the rules and guidelines don't have a homogeneous aim. Therefore, they don't match the professional ethics of the profession, and that creates 'loop holing' actions and alienating feelings for the social worker. The main reason observed is that the communication from managers to social workers is unclear. In context, this can both broaden and narrow the digital discretionary space and shape the actions of the social workers in a degrading way if they choose *not to act*—not because they don't want to use the digital tools but because they feel that the clarification of how important it is to use these tools is missing. Therefore, the choices the social workers make are impacting how their professionalism can be understood from a managerial point of view and can either be seen as an act against wanting to use the tools.

The findings of my study support previous research and have significant implications for our understanding of how the social workers' digital behavior will affect the profession in the future and, ultimately, the client's legal rights when choices are made based on missing clarification and feelings of alienation. The results of this study contribute to existing knowledge about digitalized social work by indicating that *no* factors are speaking against the use of digital tools in social work. My observations have extended the knowledge of social workers' strong feeling of professionalism and behavior in a new way. They have, overall, illustrated that the digital tools themselves are supporting and positively securing the social work profession. Digital tools present a higher degree of legal certainty for clients and support evidence-based practice for the professionalism and the use of discretion in social work. It is only if social workers and managers do not pay attention to the impact that the digital tools can have that they can become fatal for the profession on the street and screen-level. Digital tools themselves do not favor negative or positive behavior. Thus, it is about the way digital tools are communicated and the speed with which they are implemented that is missing clarification and provokes negativity. When the social worker do not have the proper training and explanation of how the tools aimed at secure and support the legal rights of their clients and how the effectiveness of using them should support the profession, only then will the tools impact the social workers' behavior negatively.

As observed in my study, the social workers then choose *not to act* and are missing clarifications and acknowledgment of their professionalism. This can be a disservice to the profession, determined professionals, and clients solely because of miscommunication. The missing clarification of goals can be avoided if more time and seriousness would be paid to the digital tools and the importance of using them correctly. The observations show that parts of social work are positively flourishing within the aspect of digital tools, while other parts are technological deserts. Some social workers are falling behind and missing out on advancing their digital skills simply because they have the opportunity to choose not to gain the new skills. Also, the missing communications from the managers of how vital training in digital tools is, is not providing guidance for who should attend the training and who shouldn't.

Finally, the negative attitudes and frustrations coming from the social workers I observe can be seen as resistance towards increased top-down monitoring of their professional choices, and not as a refusal to do the job correctly. However, on a (street and) screen-level, frustrations are misdirected

from social workers to digital tools, and can from managers perspectives be seen as a negative attitude towards changes. From the social worker perspective digital tools can be seen as a way for managers to limit their discretionary space and as mistrust in their professionalism and choices.⁶⁸

In conclusion, the findings of this study showed that, regardless of the specific case of The Job Center, attention should be paid to the communicative process and institutional framework in the way digital tools are incorporated. The policy process should plan and prioritize long-term approaches more carefully with the professional practice in mind. It has become clear that the use of discretion through digital tools together with a transparent, evidence-based profession implies a new road of choices and training for the social workers. Compared to the previous way of securing the clients' legal rights and create a better professional practice, there are now more opportunities for social workers to facilitate their work efficiently. Still, that can make the discretionary actions difficult because of the new legal constraints that, regardless of what choices are made by managers and social workers, both narrow down and open up new ways to step on the wrong foot. Yet, they also offer unique opportunities for a more efficient way of facilitating social work if the individual professional will allow it.

11.2 Final remarks

In my study, I have, through covert observations, tried to understand the underlying motivations of the social workers discretionary behavior at The Job Center. To gain a more comprehensive picture of the motives behind their behavior concerning facilitation of digital tools, a natural progression of my study would be to repeat it and use mixed methods: observations combined with a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews—firstly, with the social workers in multiple Job Centers on a national level and secondly with the managers. Considerable work will have to be done, but it could deepen the understanding of how social workers' discretionary behavior is perceived from a managerial level, and be compared to the behavior of the social workers. It would be interesting to see if the managers' clarification of the digital tool's guidelines in different Job Centers shape the social workers' discretionary behavior differently. This could provide a sharing of best practices. Furthermore, to strengthen the findings, it could provide the sampling group with a chance to explain their behavior after they have been observed, which should never be underestimated. Using mixed methods would be a fruitful method for the researcher's interpretation. It would provide an

⁶⁸ This has now and previously been confirmed by Andre Busch in his research (2019).

even better opportunity for the researcher to understand the implications of the results of the observed social workers. Thus, several questions remain to be answered, such as how the managers facilitate their communications and interpretation of the policy reforms and thereby communicate them to the social workers (a change management perspective would be interesting to incorporate), and what conclusions they have when they observe the social workers' behavior. Also, an interesting aspect is research to determine what effect digital tools have on the client. This research has not focused on interviewing clients, even though they are implicitly a part of observations in The Job Center. Further research could usefully explore to what extent the clients feel acknowledged after legislation implemented extensive digital tools in 2011. How has it impacted the client as a user of digital tools? An approach to understanding the effect of the transformations from street to screen-level could be to observe the clients over a more extended period. As many clients have been a part of The Job Center for a period of years and have seen a transformation, they could, through focus group interviews, explain how they see the digital tools impacting the interaction and relationship with the social worker. This may give rise to new ideas and unexplored questions.

An issue that was not addressed in this study, but is necessary to note as I have used observations as a method, is the current uncontrolled factor: the shutdown of The Job Center because of the pandemic⁶⁹. Unfortunately, the full five months that was first planned to be the observation period could not be carried out because of the shutdown and, therefore, came to an end after three months. Although, the research is based on a small sampling-group, the findings combined with my preliminary knowledge from the job, have made this study significant in a Danish context. The observations of everyday behavior are significant for the ethnographic method and helped build a more profound knowledge base for understanding how social workers individually organize their profession based on professionalism and not only as casual attitudes derived from stress.

My findings suggest more than one course of action. Efforts are needed to ensure that researchers continuously develop qualitative research methods that explore the social workers' interpretation of the digital tools on an institutional level. The field of digital social work is rapidly changing, and so are the digital tools. Therefore, it is a field of research that continuously needs to be updated and will continue to be of relevance to the social work profession. The importance for the social

⁶⁹ COVID-19

workers to describe, in their own words, what they find most important when they are using the digital tools may change all the time (also from a client perspective). With more extensive training, digital tools may become a part of *a traditional actions* that, in the future do not require a conscious choice, but have become a routine that entails less stress for the social worker, so she can put more energy into other tasks. Regardless of which space and actions digital tools expand or narrow, the social worker will need to stay flexible and be ready to learn new tools. Thus, history may repeat itself, the reforms will keep changing, and that will keep affecting both the profession and the tools shaping the work.

To ensure appropriate digital professional services, social workers should start to require better communication from their managers regarding the policy aimed compared to policy utilized concerning digital tools, then the social workers effectively may learn how to take control over their digital discretionary actions and not let the digital tools control their discretion stories anymore.

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