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Everyday interaction at the front-line: The case of the Norwegian all-in-one bureaucracy

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The case of the Norwegian all-in-one bureaucracy

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a sociological analysis of everyday interaction on the physical front line of the Norwegian welfare state.

Design/methodology/approach – The data are from a short-term ethnographic study in the reception/waiting rooms of three local welfare offices. These are important sites for access to benefits and services. The focus is on the situational and interactional aspects: how do people behave and interact with fellow visitors as well as with front line staff in this institutional context? For the analysis, Goffman's conceptual framework on behaviour in public places is combined with concepts from a theory of access to welfare benefits.

Findings – The analysis shows how people fill these spaces with different activities, and how they are characterized by a particular type of welfare "officialdom", boundary work and the handling of welfare stigma. Everyday interaction on the front line gives insights into the tensions in an all-in-one welfare bureaucracy and into the implementation of digitalization. The paper concludes that "old" and "new" tensions are expressed and managed at the front line, and suggests that more attention be paid to the new barriers that are developing.

Originality/value – The study contributes an ethnographic approach to a seldom studied part of welfare administration. The waiting rooms in the Norwegian welfare organization are actualized as a social arena influenced by new trends in public administration: one-stop shops, a new heterogeneity, activation policies and digitalization processes.

Keywords Welfare state, Everyday life, Front line encounters, Short-term ethnographies, Welfare waiting rooms

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

It is afternoon in the waiting room of a local welfare office in a Norwegian city. An elderly man with a stick enters through the sliding door. He approaches the counter, but is asked to take a ticket at the print spooler and joins the others who are waiting. Fragments of ongoing conversations can be heard as he walks to a chair in the waiting area: "When they have taken a decision, that's it", "There is something called practice", "NN? No, he is unavailable – he is on sick leave", and "Do you have an appointment?" The man sits down and watches the information board where the numbers are

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displayed. He waits for ten minutes, spends a few minutes talking with one of the employees at the counter, and then leaves.

This is an example of an everyday situation at the front line of a local Norwegian welfare office – a short encounter between a citizen[1] seeking some kind of assistance and the state. This kind of encounter is an ordinary and necessary part of everyday life in such organizations. The national contexts, time and systems differ. Nevertheless, the atmosphere and the main activities have similarities (e.g. Goodsell, 1984; Dubois, 2010; Auyero, 2011). The waiting rooms are physical places where people approach the welfare authorities with their needs and requests. Therefore, they are important for the availability of and access to benefits and services. Moreover, as Goodsell (1984, p. 467) wrote, it is within them that initial impressions of "officialdom" are gained. Citizens who have entered the agency premises are embraced by the setting, and receive cues to agency values and learn how they should behave.

The aim of this paper is to give a sociological analysis of everyday interaction at the physical front line of the Norwegian welfare bureaucracy (NAV[2]). The data are derived from short-term ethnography in the reception area/waiting room of three local welfare offices. What goes on in the reception area is a limited part of welfare encounters. However, it is one of the few arenas where people approach the state and interact with employees "in public"[3]. Like other studies (e.g. Morgen and Maskovsky, 2003; Kale-Lostuvali, 2007; Dubois, 2010), this study pays close attention to such everyday practices of welfare provision. The empirical analysis examines how people behave and interact with fellow visitors as well as with the front line staff in this institutional context. Furthermore, the paper delves deeper into tensions in the interactions that occur there. In particular, the paper discusses how diversity and stigma are handled in this arena and the impact of the organization's digital turn.

The new waiting rooms in the all-in-one Norwegian welfare bureaucracy[4] are of special interest because they are an extreme example of one-stop shops. The organization manages nearly all benefits and allowances in the Norwegian welfare system, and was established by merging the former employment and national welfare administrations combined with formal collaboration with social services administrations in the municipalities. The one door[5] was intended to lower the threshold for approaching the organization as well as to provide more co-ordinated services, and in particular strengthen the workfare and activation policy. In principle, all Norwegian citizens will have some benefits administrated by NAV at some point in their lives. However, the more complex a person's personal problem is, the more likely contact with the organization will be. What happens at the front line is interesting in light of the agency mergers, as they bring together the most and the least stigmatized beneficiaries. In other respects, the Norwegian welfare state is influenced by general trends that have characterized welfare state development in Europe: an intensified activation and workfare policy, ideas about user involvement/participation, as well as developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Hansen *et al.*, 2013). What can the interactions and situations at the front line reveal about access to a welfare state with these characteristic at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

Compared with the extensive literature on welfare bureaucracies, relatively little sociological attention has been given to the reception areas/front lines of these bureaucracies. Recently, they have been addressed in the scholarly literature on public administration because of the reforming trend of "one-stop shops" (see, e.g. Askim *et al.*, 2011; Bartels, 2013; Minas, 2014). However, the focus in this literature is on the representation of an organizational form rather than on the social interactions and

social relations that are played out there. There is also some research about first encounters with welfare bureaucracies that focus on the intake interaction between citizens and staff and on first categorization (e.g. Zimmerman, 1976; Minas, 2005). The focus of these studies is on the interaction between employees and visitors rather than on events in the waiting rooms as such.

However, some studies focus on these sites or include data on them in different national contexts (Soss, 1999; Watkins, 2003; Hays, 2003; Dubois, 2010; Auyero, 2010, 2011; see also Morgen and Maskovsky, 2003 for a review). This literature shows interesting similarities over time and space, as well as variations and differences between welfare bureaucracies (with either the same or different tasks) within the same nation. Goodsell's (1984) main finding in the early 1980s was that in contrast to harsh depictions of waiting rooms as places of deliberate degradation, he found a great variety. He developed a typology of five categories with metaphorical names: dog kennel, pool hall, business office, bank lobby, and circus tent. Soss (1999, p. 85) compared two welfare organizations in the USA, and found both subordination and satisfaction. He argues that satisfaction and subordination may coexist because people often have mixed experiences in such encounters. Even if they feel humiliated by long periods of waiting, hostile surroundings and intrusive questions, they may have met competent employees and received good help. Dubois (2010, pp. 38-42) points out the fundamentally asymmetrical power relationship that is apparent in the reception areas and front line encounters he studies in Paris, as do Auyero, Hays and Watkins, who focus on waiting rooms in Argentina and the USA as sites of humiliation and experiences of the effects of power in the age of neoliberalism, respectively. Whether such power relationships are visible at the front line of a welfare bureaucracy of the Scandinavian type (and if so, how) is one of the questions addressed.

Methodology

The main data used in this paper are derived from short-term participant observations in three local NAV offices[6]. The ethnographic work conducted was part of a large research project about service users' experiences with NAV during a major reform process (Lundberg, 2012; Lundberg and Syltevik, 2013). This research project was planned to rely on survey data and qualitative life world-oriented interviews with service users as its primary data sources. Fieldwork in the reception areas of the local NAV offices was included to provide insights into how citizens were met at the new front line of the organization. However, the fieldwork yielded rich ethnographic data about everyday life at the welfare state front line that offered insights into aspects other than those covered in the interviews. Access to the NAV offices to conduct the fieldwork and recruit interviewees was granted by the heads of the respective NAV offices.

Pink and Morgan (2013, p. 353) argue that short-term ethnography is characterized by a form of intensity that may be fruitful in certain sites. The waiting areas of the NAV offices were such sites. These spaces were observed for a total of four weeks[7], and approximately 2,800 people visited the three offices during that time. Overall, a considerable number of encounters between the NAV and the public were observed. A week is a very long time in a waiting room compared to the time that people ordinarily spend there. Most visitors to these waiting rooms are there for a very short time (unlike those in other places, such as those in Buenos Aires studied by Auyero, 2011), while employees work shifts on the counter for a few hours at a time.

Physical structures are important in shaping the kinds of practice that can take place. Moreover, the design of bureaucracies has a symbolic meaning connected to power relations as well as levels of service attitudes (Goodsell, 1984; Dubois, 2010). While all three waiting rooms were furnished with couches, chairs and computers for the public, the arrangement of the counter varied. The counter is important, as it represents a significant part of the physical structure and separates the employees from visitors (Maynard-Moody, 2010, p. ix). Office 1 was dominated by a physical counter placed in the middle of the room, with room for four employees who served the queue using a digital print spool system. Behind the counter there were smaller offices for conversations with people who needed more information or help than could be provided at the counter. In office 2, there was no physical counter. The visitors were supposed to take a ticket with a queue number, wait until this number was shown on the information board, and open a door to approach the offices where the employees were. In a sense, this door was the "counter". Office 3 had a distinctive counter, which was discreet in physical terms because it consisted of two desks in a corner of the room, but it was obvious that this was where people should direct their inquiries. As in office 1, those present could hear fragments of talk from the brief discussions at these desks.

Despite these local variations, the waiting rooms shared many characteristics. For one, the fragments of talk and interaction were related to the same sorts of issues, documents (e.g. benefits and application forms), rules and cases. Second, the organization logo showed that they were NAV offices, and many of the same posters and information materials were displayed in the waiting rooms. These were mostly related to work and work expectations. There were also posters about how visitors should behave, for example: "Self-help: How to find your papers on 'My page' ".

The researchers were both sociologists, but unlike in terms of age and sex. One had worked as a case worker in NAV for one year prior to entering the research project as a researcher. However, he had no experience with face-to-face encounters with service users as his work experience was in a case work unit detached from any local NAV office. The other author has visited quite a few "welfare front lines" in the past as an experienced researcher of social assistance offices. For both researchers, the new front line represented a new and unfamiliar arena.

Information about the researchers' presence was provided on the information screens in the offices, and they wore tags indicating their names and profession. During the fieldwork they behaved as unobtrusively as possible towards those present. The researchers sat or stood in the waiting areas (depending on the availability of seats) as well as by the computers provided for visitors. They avoided staring at people, moved around and tried their best to "fit in". On the other hand, they talked with employees and visitors who made contact with them. However, most people paid them little attention. This was certainly the case during the busiest hours of the day. In this sense, they were more or less covert observers. Although they did not participate in social activities, like many other visitors they participated silently by being present and observing a natural environment (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). During the fieldwork they experienced the tensions in the arena. For example, one of the authors wrote in his field notes after a week at one of the offices that he was so happy to have an income and able to leave. The field notes also revealed that the authors experienced unease and anxiety in the atmosphere several times. They sensed in their bodies that something was at stake for those present in this domain.

The field notes were made on paper or on mobile phones while the researchers were sitting at the available desks and computers. Ethnographic data are socially

constructed, and the field notes were interpreted through the observers' eyes. The observations began with the intention of understanding what went on in this new arena, the arrangement of the physical space, the interactions between visitors and employees, and of identifying points of interest for later study. The observations focused on situations, such as people entering the premises, encounters with employees, interactions between visitors, sounds and activities in various areas of the waiting rooms and the offices themselves with devices such as spoolers, computers, counters, information material and furniture. Like Watson (2012), the researchers discovered that when engaged in organizational ethnography, they were engaged in ethnography of everyday life.

The analytical focus of this paper was developed through an abductive process, searching for recurring themes in the field notes and theoretical concepts and perspectives to understand them. The themes chosen are the interactions and life that those present brought to these arenas, the types of (NAV) interaction identified as characteristic of these sites, boundary work related to stigmas, and the impact of screen-level bureaucracy and the organization's attempt to turn digital. After identifying these themes, the researchers went through all the material, searching for such situations with the analytical tools described in the analytical framework section below. The presentation is a mixture of realistic, impressionist and structural tales of events in these waiting rooms (Bryman, 2012, p. 463). The aim is to give a third person account based on the roles of bystander and outsider to the situations observed. The result is an analysis of the ethnographic data "with theory in mind" (Layder, 1998, p. 51).

Analytic framework

Early literature on welfare encounters pointed out that encounters between the state and the citizen cannot be understood without understanding the roles that these encounters play in the structure of the welfare state (Lipsky, 1980; Hasenfeld *et al.* 1987). Lipsky (1980) introduced the concept of street-level bureaucracy as an approach to organizations where the employees work in direct contact with people and have some discretion in their work, as do the employees at the local welfare offices. The front line of street-level bureaucracies is where the process of "people processing" starts (Prottas, 1979; Lipsky, 1980, p. 59) and the street-level bureaucrats have a particular role as gate-keepers. This perspective gives important insights into the institutional context of the waiting rooms studied. However, because the aim is to focus on the interactions and everyday life in such places, Lipsky's perspective is connected to a theory of access that was often used in studies of the relationship between citizens and the administration in Norway in the 1970s and 1980s (Hansen *et al.*, 2013). This theory explained inequality in access to public services with the existence of thresholds and barriers in the system. The concepts of threshold, queue and counter addressed the problems of distribution, because administrations act on demand and not according to needs (Jakobsen *et al.*, 1982, p. 41). The threshold refers to the knowledge of eligibility for help and/or to conquering the stigma of approaching the authorities. The queue represents rules and procedures of how the queues are served, while the counter is the arena where citizens have to master the particular rules of the game. This may include laws or casework procedures, as well as bureaucratic competence. All of these stages are barriers that affect who receives help (and who does not). The waiting rooms are the physical venue for receiving information, where a queue is organized and where the first approaches to individual cases are made. The concepts are also relevant in

discussions of the development of ICT and self-help technology, which is one feature of the front line of the contemporary Norwegian welfare agency.

The sites in question are public places in the sense that they are open to visitors, and anyone can enter and stay there for some time. Goffman's concepts and key principles regarding how people behave in public and semi-public places are therefore highly relevant (Goffman, 1963a, 1981). Concepts such as civil inattention, participant framework, impression management, front stage and back stage, as well as his general approach to social interaction, illuminate how people act and react in such arenas.

The analysis also draws on Goffman's work on stigma. Goffman (1963b, p. 3) defined stigma as "an attribute that others perceive to be deeply discrediting". The NAV front would assumingly be among the least stigmatizing as all kinds of benefits are available there, from social assistance with its roots in the old poor law and unemployment benefits to old age pensions and parental leave benefits. However, negative stereotyping has always followed welfare benefits (Rogers-Dillon, 1995), and the waiting rooms are potential sites of stigmatization as those present are, in Goffman's terms "discreditable" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 57). By being there, they disclose that they may be among those who receive contested welfare benefits. The concept of "boundary work" is used in order to address welfare stigma at the front. "Boundary work" refers to "the kind of typification system or interferences, concerning similarities and differences that groups mobilize to define who they are" (Lamont and Molnar, 2002, p. 171). Such boundaries may be drawn based on class, race, ethnicity and gender as well as different welfare benefits.

The waiting area of the welfare state

The NAV reception areas are heterogeneous social arenas. All kinds of people visit: young people, elderly people, parents with small children in prams, people in wheelchairs, couples, men in blue-collar work outfits with joiner's tools and helmets, women and men in suits, and women wearing hijabs or other recognizable religious garb. Those who have appointments are fetched from the reception area by employees. Those who just drop in must wait until their numbers are displayed on the board and they can present their query at the counter. Most visitors do not draw attention to themselves; they come alone, take a ticket, wait quietly, eventually check something on the computer, deliver their applications or obtain information at the counter and then leave. Those who entered together talked quietly while they waited. Others met friends or acquaintances. Children played, and strangers occasionally entered into conversations. In this sense, the reception areas are social arenas with multiple activities and a variety of social relations, and where focused as well as unfocused interaction occurs (Goffman, 1963a, p. 24).

There is a rhythm in the reception areas based on the time of year, the hour of the day, and the day of the week, and the activity varies locally. However, pay-out days, delivery of post from the organization and other routines are important preconditions. This is a matter of course for those familiar with the routines, while it may be strange and surprising to those who are new to this arena. The activity in the waiting rooms may also be seen as an indicator of the situation in the labour market and in the community that the offices serve. When a large industrial enterprise had to dismiss its employees, this was the place where the redundant workers queued.

Waiting is the main activity. People wait either standing or sitting, often with papers clutched in their hands and their faces turned towards the boards where the numbers

appear or the doors where the employees enter the waiting area to fetch those with an appointment. The waiting time is spent in different ways. Some just sit there, while others read the newspapers provided. Others study the papers that they have brought with them or talk on their mobile phones. Information is both given and received (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). Most people give each other the benefit of civil inattention. They demonstrate awareness of others' presence, but withdraw their attention and mostly act as if the others are of no particular interest (Goffman, 1963a, p. 84).

To understand the "system" of approaching the employees and presenting a problem, a learning process is required. Newcomers often had problems understanding how they were supposed to navigate this setting, and people worked at "fitting in" (Goffman, 1963a, p. 12). Sometimes the visitors here organized the queue themselves and gave newcomers advice, making comments such as: "When you have been standing here for a while, you understand what they are doing" (Fieldwork diary 2:19). The "system" in the reception area was also one of the common topics of conversation between the people who met there. This led to more prolonged chats wherein people talked about NAV, and if the waiting time was long, they questioned the speed and work of the employees.

Most people came with a purpose that required face-to-face contact with an employee. Such encounters are played out, shaped and restricted by the particular tasks and processes of the organization. Fragments of talk between people on their way out of the reception area or on the phone illustrate the kind of interaction they had:

> "I've got an appointment tomorrow", "I will meet my new caseworker tomorrow", "It was lucky that we went today. Now this is considered urgent. They hadn't done anything so far with the application", and "I have written my name here, but who is my caseworker?"

Perhaps even clearer are the fragments of talk heard from employees:

> "No, you have to register. Do you have a bank statement? You always have to give us the last one you received", "I shall give him your message. You are supposed to meet at 13:00", "Do you need help to fill in the form?", "Ok, you have been working for some time in Norway. Do you receive any benefits?", "Take good care of the papers", "It is ok, but we have to follow the rules", "Have you checked Nav.no yet? There you can just log on", "Do you have the receipts?", "We need an end date", "There is a B here. That means that your payment has stopped".

These phrases have a distinct character. They are bits and pieces of what may be termed "bureaucratic casework talk". This is routinized form of talk that refers to bureaucratic terms and processes involved in translating the person's situation to a case. In this context, people need to learn how to categorize themselves in the way that the organization demands (Lipsky, 1980, p. 61) and relate to a type of institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992). For the people contacting NAV, this may represent an unfamiliar language, underlining the asymmetrical power relations in these interactions. However, to the employees this is their everyday working language.

To conclude so far, the front line of the Norwegian all-in-one bureaucracy is designed to include most people, with its universal design, play corner for children, computers for free use, chairs and sofas, and a variety of activities take place there. However, interactions are dominated by the bureaucratic casework that is the main reason for people being there. The atmosphere is a mix of the intention to be an arena for both assistance and subordination. "Officialdom" is displayed through the physical environment, the content of conversations, and interaction. Banners and posters about

work and helping one's self signal the Norwegian welfare state's work orientation. The efficient and modern presentation is broken by the congestion and long waiting times in periods with many visitors, and the atmosphere varies between quiet and relaxed, and busy, cramped and tense.

"Tensions" – boundary work at the front

The reception area of a NAV office is also an arena for boundary work and the management of welfare stigma. Goffman is particularly interested in such arenas of mixed contact, where the stigmatized and the "normal" are in immediate physical proximity (Goffman, 1963a, p. 23). Emotions had to be managed and "face work" done (Goffman, 1967). A tense atmosphere and boundary work on the NAV front line was often observed. The following episode is a typical illustration:

> An elderly lady enters the NAV reception area and joins two men standing by the print spooler, trying to remove a ticket that is stuck in the machine. They also help the lady, and upon getting her ticket she says: "Many thanks. I am not familiar with this system. I have been lucky, if I can put it like that". One of the men answers with a smile: "When you have to, you get used to it soon enough". The conversation goes smoothly (on different themes) until the lady asks her helper, "Why are you here?" He answers, "There are so many things", and the conversation ends (Field diary 2:32).

This episode illustrates that people do not like to discuss every kind of need or application with strangers in public, and there is a kind of defensive cowering (avoidance of giving information, making oneself invisible) (Goffman, 1963b, p. 28). The episode may also identify a display of self-image, as the lady is distancing herself from the environment.

In other situations, it was the employees who set boundaries with regards to what may or may not be discussed in the "front stage" of the reception area:

> A woman enters the reception room, takes an application form from the stand by the entrance, and sits down to fill it in. One of the employees is busy organizing informational material, and the woman turns to her and asks if she has to apply for social assistance for herself and her son separately or if they could fill in the same form. The employee answers: "I am sorry, but I cannot talk about this in the reception area. You'll have to wait for your turn" (Field diary 2:59).

The lady's response resembled what Goffman (1963b, p. 29) termed bravado, audibly announcing to those present that she did not see what the problem was. She continued, arguing that it ought to be possible to talk about the law. However, the employee left the room without further response.

The reception areas also demarcated "us" from "them", based on audible or visible characteristics such as language, skin colour and clothing. This was done in subtle ways, such as a visitor talking on the phone saying: "You could ask yourself whether the people here have the same right to be here". These kinds of boundaries were very explicit, as a number of blue-collar workers from Eastern Europe who had temporarily lost their jobs had come to apply for benefits:

> Five men enter, while a young woman talks on the phone: "Yes I am at NAV. There is some problem with my money. It is crazy what they are able to do […] I don't know what has happened; there are a lot of foreigners here. I am apparently number 200 in the queue, and it looks like I am in another country" (Field diary 2:83).

The indirect character of such comments is typical; they are not directed at those to whom they refer. However, they are audible to those nearby. The usual response of the

bystanders was civil inattention, or as Goffman (1963a, p. 156) writes: "when they overhear the content of encounters and interaction going on they are not a part of, people often simulate civil inattention, giving the impression that conventional closure is obtained".

Even if the atmosphere in the waiting rooms was often tense, there was nothing more serious than episodes involving raised voices and threatening body language during the period of the observations. Pale faces, watchful eyes and clenched fists were observed. More emotional and audible outbursts were less frequent. Some made their claims in more demanding terms than others:

> It's a crisis! If you can't do anything so I can support myself […] You have to help. NAV has some responsibility (Field diary 3:27).

Others left the reception area by slamming the door and/or using strong language, while others composed themselves when reprimanded by staff. These kinds of episodes may point to the importance of these encounters for the individual.

While there were many emotional outbursts from those visiting, such emotional reactions were rare from the employees. One episode made the researchers reflect on the absence of such emotional displays, because the employee, in this case, addressed the emotions of the person: "I see your frustration, but there is nothing we can do" (Field diary 1:11). This reference to the feelings of the citizen was unusual. More common though, was the last part of the answer. Employees made statements like: "I am sorry, there is nothing we can do", "No. That's the way it is. We can only say that we are sorry". These remarks underline the organization's lack of responsibility and options in the situation. Lipsky (1980, p. 64) points out that utterances like these are ways of bringing the person to see the agency's point of view. The dominant form of interaction is a neutral but friendly tone. The employees are well aware of their role as "front stage" representatives of the organization, and perform it by keeping a professional and friendly but distanced position with respect to citizens. This bureaucratic entanglement may also reinforce anger (Lipsky, 1980, p. 66).

The contradictory demands of openness, availability and security are not easy to manage for employees or the organization. The mix of people in a variety of situations creates tensions. The new front line soon became associated with abuse of benefits and stigma in the general public debate (Hansen *et al.*, 2013). The field notes show many kinds of boundary work related to welfare stigma, both between visitors and in interactions with employees. The ethnographic analysis disclosed both tensions between Norwegian citizens and "foreigners", and between those with "simple" requests and those with less clear-cut needs and life situations. The role of claimant and receiver of benefits is not unproblematic, and this is apparent at the physical front line of this welfare bureaucracy.

Screen level at the street level

Screen-level bureaucracy is a concept coined by Bovens and Zouridis (2002, p. 177), to capture the change from face-to-face encounters to contact through or in the presence of a computer screen in street-level bureaucracies (cf. also Reddick, 2005; Magretts, 2012; Pors, 2015). When one enters these NAV offices one is met by rows of desks with computers. There are also several references to the website of the organization on posters and informational material. The Nav.no website represents a different front stage of the organization, and has extensive information about social benefits and allowances. Nav.no is the site for emerging self-service solutions in areas such as

applications for pensions, parental leave benefits, and the electronic notification card for those who are unemployed because their ability to work is limited. The intention is to make self-service technologies the first choice, so that most requests can be resolved online. This makes it possible for people to access NAV in their own living rooms at a time of their own choice, lowering the threshold for approaching the organization for many. However, for others, the increased prevalence of screen-level bureaucracy represents new barriers. In the reception/waiting areas of the NAV offices the "work" of street-level bureaucrats attempting to motivate people to use the web pages and "Your Nav" was observed. People were asked to use the website, and were shown how to do so on the computers that were available. When people were asked to use the computers, they gave varying responses. One lady protested audibly: "I have no Internet. I have electricity, that's enough. I am old fashioned". Some declined more quietly. Others let the staff help them. People were assisted by employees to send notification cards about their work activities in order to receive unemployment benefits; they were assisted in completing applications for various benefits, and they were shown how to set up their own accounts. Because these conversations were relatively detailed, it was not difficult for others nearby to learn about the kind of support for which the visitor had applied. Several signs near the computers in office 3 indicated that this could be a complex job. On the left-hand side, there was a notice about people being welcome to use the computers to choose a form. On the right-hand side, there was a placard with the heading Are you ready to send? and the following text:

1: Remember that the papers are read by a machine, so use blue or black pen.

2: Remember that enclosures should be taped to a white sheet, both at the top and on each side.

3: All papers have to be laid with the text in the same direction.

4: Please do not use stickers.

5: Put the front page (personalized for your case) at the front.

6: Do not send originals because they will not be returned. An exception is receipts, which must always be originals.

7: Do not send pure information pages.

On the mouse pads, the following advice was given: "It is easiest to do it correctly immediately", and to encourage the supervisors: "To those of you who inform and supervise users: get as many people as possible to start their applications on Nav.no".

There is no doubt that to manage this, a person must not only be able to use computers but also know how to fill in forms and have an organized method of completing them, which is not as equally easy for everyone. The process of learning to use the self-service technologies is encouraged and managed by employees and described in text. Thus, it represents a new part of "people processing" and teaching people how to behave as clients (Prottas, 1979; Lipsky, 1980). Bovens and Zouridis (2002) argue that this is just the first step towards system-level bureaucracies where decisions are made by the data programme/system. So far, this has not been the case in NAV. The number of people that have visited the web pages is rising (Hansen, 2013). However, web technologies have not yet eliminated the citizens' need for contact with local staff, and it seems to be more an issue of providing many channels through which to contact the organization. Of those who had used NAV's web pages, 80 per cent had

also visited a local NAV office, 65 per cent had met a NAV employee, 70 per cent had communicated with NAV by telephone and 40 per cent had sent e-mails or SMS text messages (Hansen, 2013, p. 61). What occurred in the waiting rooms studied were processes of teaching citizens the skills required and the challenges in making the digital shift.

The welfare front line in the twenty-first century

The establishment of the all-in-one welfare bureaucracy NAV created a new arena for all who apply for benefits and allowances from the Norwegian welfare state. The intention was to make it less demanding to enter the "one door". Compared with the waiting rooms that Goodsell (1984) described in the USA in the 1980s, these NAV offices seem to be a mixture of a bank lobby, with a modern appearance and atmosphere, and a business office, with individualized dyadic transactions. However, there is also a trace of the lively interaction of the circus tent at the liveliest hours. The atmosphere differed over the course of a day and during the week, and this may have represented different challenges for those visiting. Even with comfortable seats, short waiting times and attempts to create a friendly atmosphere, one is left in no doubt that this is the waiting room of a powerful bureaucracy where something is at stake for some of those who enter. Auyero (2010) has argued that there is a feeling of subordination linked to waiting as such; it is the employees who decide when contact begins, which signals that the organization's time is more valuable than that of those who wait. Lipsky (1980, p. 95) also reminds us that even the most modest arrangements for queuing impose costs on citizens. In addition, the structure of the interactions limits and determines the range of behaviours that citizens may engage in (Lipsky, 1980, p. 61). Most people enter and leave without talking to fellow visitors. Even if people may socialize and meet in this arena, most welfare encounters have a unique individual character. Companionate and humorous interactions with a sense of "being in the same boat" occur, but not often. It is the individual who approaches the authorities with their personal troubles (Mills, 2000).

Re-organization of the front of welfare bureaucracies has been implemented in many European Countries in recent years. These changes have been related to implementation of activation policies, and to the framing of fragmentation as a policy problem (Askim *et al.*, 2011; Minas, 2014). However, the extension and types of services were larger than in for example UK's Job Centre Plus and in Denmark's jobcentres (see Askim *et al.*, 2011). Similar to other countries the "one door" to NAV was meant to make access to the welfare bureaucracy and its services easier. That NAV is a single organization probably lowers the threshold for approaching the organization. However, the organization has become larger and more complex. The queue and counter demand skills and knowledge that are unequally distributed, and both manoeuvring in the physical waiting areas as well as making contact through telephone or web pages demand certain skills, such as relating to institutional talk and interaction. In addition, the mixed arena may create new barriers related to stigma. The interaction in the NAV waiting areas is shaped in a context of bureaucratic casework, workfare and the contested role of recipient of welfare benefits in Norwegian society. To put it in simple terms, on the one hand, no one knows whether people are there to apply for social assistance (the most strictly means tested and stigmatized benefit in the Norwegian welfare system) when they enter, but on the other hand, nobody knows that they are not. In addition the activation and work-oriented banners

may represent a barrier and indicate a lack of recognition for people who are there because they struggle with health issues and everyday tasks.

Simultaneous with the creation of the all-in-one bureaucracy there has been a digital turn which also represents new barriers as well as opportunities. The digital turn in welfare bureaucracies represents an international trend (see, e.g. Henman, 2010), and will have major impact on organisation of welfare state fronts in the time to come. Self-help technologies and a focus on making visitors approach the organization through the web offers easier access for many, but a raised threshold for others, as it may demand skills they lack. Instruction from the employees in using the computers in the waiting area to complete applications is an example of NAV's ambition to enable people to manage web pages and self-help technologies on their own. On the other hand, it also means that people must demonstrate their lack of computer skills in public.

A comprehensive effort is made to direct people to online resources and self-help technologies instead of appearing in person. If it succeeds, it will make access easier for some and more difficult for others. The waiting area will be for those who are unable or have no opportunity to access the welfare state in private. If an increasingly large proportion of the queue is successfully moved from a physical to a digital front line, this is expected to be followed by changes in the number, resource level and/or design of local NAV offices. There are also discussions about centralizing NAV's services that may increase distances to the physical front line for citizens, which is again likely to influence patterns of interaction between individuals and the state. A third driver of change may relate to security issues. Problems of violence and threats from citizens have led to discussions of implementing various measures such as architectural changes and employing more security guards.

The activities at the front line of a welfare bureaucracy are a part of the everyday life of the welfare state. Short-term ethnographies at the front line provide, as shown in this paper, access to actors, situations and interactions as well as revealing institutional settings on a micro level. The interaction in the waiting areas is part of the process of separating those who are eligible for or deserving of benefits and services from those who are not. In the waiting rooms, the visitors meet these demands in their twenty-fist century form. Further ethnographic research at the front about the boundary work done there and the digital turn of such organizations will give information that may be important for discussions about the welfare state in different national contexts. Whatever solutions chosen, research on the welfare state's front line will continue to be relevant for understanding the new barriers that may arise to accessing welfare benefits.

Notes

1. In the contemporary vocabulary of the Norwegian welfare state, the people who contact and eventually receive assistance from the welfare bureaucracy are called "users" or "service users". "Client", "recipient", "claimant" and "customer" are other terms for those approaching the welfare organization, each emphasizing different dimensions of the relationship. "Citizen" or "person" is mostly used to avoid some of these associations.
2. NAV is the name of the organization. It is not an acronym but the Norwegian word for "hub".
3. Apart from this physical front line (a Norwegian version where anyone may visit) it is also possible to call or visit the web pages.
4. The NAV reform was implemented July 2006.

5. "One door to all services" was the slogan when the three former welfare agencies were merged.
6. The offices were chosen because they covered variations with regard to size and the area they served. Office 1 has 100 employees and is located in one of the largest cities in Norway. The neighbourhood has inner city problems such as poverty, drug problems and a high proportion of people on social assistance. Office 2 is located in a coastal municipality in an area with a high degree of maritime activity and other industry, and has approximately 30 employees. Office 3 has 40 employees and is located in an area with both agriculture and industry.
7. Both authors observed office 1 for one week each, while author two spent one week in office 2 and one in office 3. In the research project as a whole, additional data include interviews with 38 citizens, observations of encounters between employees and citizens, a survey and an analysis of political documents (Lundberg and Syltevik, 2013).

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