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# The Power of Professors and Professionals: How Professions Shape Organizational Systems in Elite University Admissions

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## Abstract

Elite university admissions are administered by a range of organizational actors depending on national and institutional contexts. While the outcomes of high-stakes elite university admissions have been studied extensively, the opaque admissions selection process remains undertheorized and understood. Using theories of professions and systems theory to examine unique qualitative interview data from admissions selectors in both the U.S. and England, this paper sheds light on the opaque decision-making of elite university admissions shaped by professional contexts and organizational dynamics. We find that the self-regulated profession of professors and the less autonomous professional staff selectors influence the decision-making processes of elite university admissions. Understanding elite university admissions based on the macro/meso-context of professions and their organizational system structure offers a theoretically original approach for future research and the potential to create more equitable admissions processes through new change strategies.

## Keywords

Systems theory, academic profession, widening participation, college access, elite, admissions, higher education

## Introduction

Admission to elite universities is the key route for education-based social mobility (Britton et al., 2019; Chetty et al., 2017) and societal leadership (Chetty et al., 2023). Elite university admissions have been rife with dynamic struggles over the inclusion and exclusion of different social groups, based on identity such as religion, gender, and race (Aisch et al., 2017; Anderson & Svrluga, 2019; Karabel, 2005; Stacpoole, 1986; Wood, 2018). In the current political context where the US has federally banned the use of race in admissions processes, income inequality is widening in both England and the U.S., and there are increasing numbers of students entering postsecondary education worldwide (Altbach et al., 2019), the issue of skewed access advantaging privileged young people has never been more important.

Admissions research has explored different areas of contextual backgrounds of students using theoretical tools and traditions such as Bourdieusian cultural capital theory (Bourdieu 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), social reproduction (Lucas, 2001), rational action theories (Goldthorpe, 1998), human capability theory (Nussbaum, 2011), and psychological theories (Harrison, 2018). What is less explored are the organizational and sociopolitical contexts that shape how admissions selectors make decisions in selecting students for elite universities.

Across the higher education sector, but also in the elite Ivy League institutions in the US, professionalized admissions staff recruit, admit, and enrol undergraduate students (Jones et al., 2019; Stevens, 2007). In contrast, at the elite universities of England, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue their long-standing tradition of self-governing power to have their own academic faculty, using their academic judgement, admitting undergraduate students (Jones et al., 2019; Stevens, 2007). Based on these distinct differences in admissions practices we are left to wonder, how do these differences in professional and organizational contexts matter to elite undergraduate admissions?

Despite this well ploughed area of scholarly inquiry, there is very little prior analytical work interrogating the connections between theories of professions and organizational social systems. In the present article, we wish to follow Sherer's (2019) advice to link currently "seemingly unrelated pieces" together and explore the phenomenon of elite undergraduate admissions "while remaining true to both theory building and testing" (p. 91). Thus, we seek to contribute to the theory and scholarship of professions and organizational social systems through examining elite university admissions by asking: What can we learn from the professional and system theories about university admissions? Specifically, *how does the professional background of university admissions selectors shape organizational social systems that*

*influence elite university admissions decisions?* By understanding how professional background and profession shape decision making we can better understand how the two professions in the present article—professional selectors in the US and academic faculty in England—shape organizational social systems.

We draw on the sociology of professions and organizational systems theory to answer these questions to contribute to both theoretical knowledge as well as providing applied perspectives for those working in the sociology of inequality, widening participation of university admissions, and other stakeholders seeking to affect change towards greater inclusion in both university systems and social stratification.

# Literature review

## *University professions*

English and US elite universities have different organizational structures and approaches to the task of admitting new students. One key source of these different social structuration processes lies in the location and characteristics of those making admissions decisions (Giddens, 1979). At the English Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge)[1], academic faculty create processes and have ultimate responsibility to admit students to their college and degree of study as part of their larger portfolio of professional tasks. In the US, at the elite Ivy League institutions, there is an organizational labour force of professionalized staff with the sole focus of recruiting, admitting, and yielding undergraduate students.

Hallmarks of professions are a shared knowledge base, formal entrance requirements, an agreed code of ethics (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933), self-regulation (Freidson, 2001), and for high status professions—abstract knowledge and task autonomy (Abbott, 1988). Professions have jurisdiction over a certain area of work as well as the expertise to undertake core tasks and "internal and external networks to accumulate and distribute resources" (Liu, 2018, p. 46). The academic profession has been described as a "pure profession" (Abbott, 1988), a "calling" (Weber, 1917/1946), or "key profession" (Perkin, 1969) because of the sophisticated character of a profession's knowledge and the amount of internal control it has over professional tasks.

Professional expertise is a combination of academic and situational experiences with the former usually acquired in formal education and the latter in the workplace through peer interactions (Freidson, 2001). Specifically, academics' professional expertise "comprises an amalgam of scientific and normative elements" (Halliday cited in Suddaby et al., 2019, p. 107). Suddaby et al. (2019) describe this as a syncretic epistemological foundation because "syn-

[1] There are other universities in England and the UK where admissions is also undertaken by professional service staff with minimal academic involvement.

cretic professions must generate their own knowledge standards often on a relatively localized basis. What, for example, are decision standards for determining an outstanding poem, novel, or a film?" (Suddaby et al., 2019, p. 107). Professional standards, such as judging a poem, are derived more fluidly, depending on localized orders of worth (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). As a result, standards "are typically achieved by processes of argumentation, negotiation and eventual agreement" (Suddaby et al., 2019, p. 108). Values penetrate professional standards of decision-making, making it more difficult to adjudicate.

The main control processes of academic labour, as with some other professions (Larson, 2017), is not within the market, but within peer review from self-regulated academic and scientific communities (Merton, 1957; Musselin, 2009). Academic self-regulation occurs through professional self-governing associations of formal colleagues and social networks (Liu, 2018; Parry & Parry, 1976). Internal professional networks facilitate resource exchanges and everyday work and developing expertise (Helgadóttir, 2016), they form and consolidate identity and values (Henkel, 2000), and symbolic forms of distinction are constructed and manifested (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). For academics, economic resources and prestige (e.g., research grants, fellowships, election to learned societies) are awarded through peer panels evaluations and review.

Saks (2016) observed that "certain occupations have been able to regulate market conditions in their favour, despite competition" (p. 176); specific organizational contexts also impact professional identities and roles (Henkel, 2000). Musselin (2009) describes the impenetrability of market forces to academic work where "expanding institutional or market forces are added and combine in turn, with the professional forces" (p. 16). Oxbridge academics are particularly protected from a new "market logic" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Unlike academics elsewhere nationally or internationally (e.g., Enders & de Weert, 2009), Oxbridge faculty have successfully resisted transformation into a more formal corporatized organization and maintained their self-regulation (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Musselin, 2006). Overall, Oxbridge academics are close to the ideal-typical description that "members of the academic profession are seen as belonging to a largely independent and guild-like community, invoking powerful doctrines such as academic freedom and autonomy, community of scholars, collegial authority and a strong emphasis on the determination of goals, and on the management and administration of their institutions" (Enders & de Weert, 2009, p. 2).

Reviewing theories of professions highlights the entanglement of professions in organizational and broader societal contexts (Adams, 2015). As Brock et al. (2014) argue, this connection means professions can become important actors in spheres other than their original one. University admissions then is not only an organizational process affecting universities but a larger reflection of broader social contexts about who is "desired" for selection for elite post-secondary education (Bowen & Bok 1998; Charles et al., 2009; Chetty et al., 2017; Massey et al., 2003). Scholarship on social desirability have previously resulted in systematic exclusions of people with minoritized identities (e.g., women, people of colour, religious minorities; Basit

& Tomlinson, 2012). Presently, socioeconomically privileged, able-bodied, young people, and those without caring responsibility disproportionately attend elite universities in both England and the US (Reay et al., 2005; Slaughter & Taylor, 2016; Ulriksen, 2009).

## *Systems theory*

We utilize the typology of systems theory as an analytical tool to better understand how professors and professionals are influenced by external and organizational structure, practices, and processes. Social systems theory (SST) derives organizational behaviour from individual interaction (i.e., idiographic dimension) with organizational context (i.e., nomothetic dimension; Bess & Dee, 2008). SST is adapted from the biological sciences and general systems theories which describe the interconnections between internal organizational actors, processes, and structures to the external environment (Scott & Davis. 2007). To understand university admissions processes, we use two types of social systems based on their gradience of external influence—open and cybernetic organizational systems (Boulding, 1956).

### Open systems

Open systems theory recognizes the importance of environmental context and the pressure to influence organizational structures, processes, and behaviours (Pondy & Mitroff, 1979; Scott & Davis. 2007). In open-system organizations, boundaries are often spanned and redefined to flex with environmental and market pressure (Berrien, 1968). In a highly market-driven profession like hospitality, if consumers and the market call for healthier food options, the field of individual restaurants will respond to meet market force demands. In open-system organizations, the environment provides a context where organizational actors regularly interact with, take direction from, and match environmental pressures (Berrien, 1968). The open-system organization can respond more quickly to external change but may do so by focusing less on internal mission.

### Cybernetic systems

Cybernetic systems are still open to external influence but are more goal-oriented and self-regulated from internal feedback loops which allows the organization and organizational actors to limit and control interactions with the external environment (DeYoung & Krueger, 2018). A cybernetic organizational system comprises of sub-systems within organizations where professionalized areas of expertise (i.e., university admissions) are connected through information flow and defined processes designed for self-regulation (Birnbaum, 1988; Scott & Davis, 2007). Using the theoretical lenses of theories of professions and SST we now freshly interrogate previous interview records with selectors for elite universities in England and the US.

# Societal context

Providing some context to our research and methods aids with understanding the knowledge claims that could be derived from this type of research. There are obvious limitations to internationally comparative research that tries to isolate a single dimension for comparison (i.e., professionals and professors in admission) when these professions are situated in the complex social web of wider societies. There are key similarities and differences between the two countries. The two countries have similar overall rates of participation in higher education (just over 50%; Mountford-Zimdars, 2016) and feature stratified systems of higher education with elite and non-elite institutions (Raffe & Croxford 2015). However, the US system is more marketised than the English system with one in four providers being private compared to approximately 2% in the UK (Hunt & Boliver 2019). There are striking similarities regarding the dynamic between social background and the stratified higher education systems in both countries: In the US, a select 38 colleges—including five Ivy League universities—educate more students from the top 1% of income than the bottom 60%. This reproduction of inequality from elite education has, if anything, worsened since 2002 (Aisch et al., 2017). Similarly, a group of eight secondary schools, mostly private, send more students to Oxbridge than over 75% of all schools and colleges in the UK taken together (Coughlan, 2018). In addition, students from the top 20% of English advantaged neighbourhoods are almost six times more likely to attend a selective UK university than the most disadvantaged young people (UCAS, 2018).

While there is significant research from the "demand side" of higher education, looking at students' characteristics and their educational journeys, less focus has paid attention to the role of organizational actors and their role in social reproduction, along with their opportunity for changing admissions processes and outcomes. While often neglected, admissions selectors in the US have been influenced by external pressures as was the case in 1922 with the Princeton University director of admissions Radlciff Heermance. In the historic account of this deanship, a key challenge evidenced in correspondence from the endowment fund manager and other admissions staff was to reduce the number of Jewish students admitted, a challenge also accepted by other Ivy League selectors (Karabel, 2005). While not part of our new empirical analysis, this is a strong indication that early admissions staff at Ivy League were already required to quickly respond to sociopolitical pressures of their core constituents in "creating a class" (Stevens, 2007) of admitted students that was acceptable.

# Methods

Like other research in the field of professional and organizational studies, we utilize data collected, analyzed, and published for earlier purposes in educational policy research (Mountford-Zimdars, 2016), but are revisiting these data to specifically theorize about the phenomenon of elite university admissions and contribute to the evolution of theory of professions (Sherer, 2019). Reanalyzing data is useful for extending or developing theoretical and epistemological perspectives (Borzillo & Deschaux-Dutard, 2020). In particular, qualitative

data and inquiry is uniquely positioned to understand mechanisms and processes from policy-related phenomena (Maxwell, 2020).

## *Data*

The original study had ethical approval and consisted of 16 in-depth qualitative interviews with admissions selectors from Ivy League universities (i.e., admissions professionals) and Oxbridge universities (i.e., academic professors). The sensemaking of those who undertake tasks is useful because organizational knowledge is embedded in organizational actors' cognitive recollection and descriptions of enactment of processes (Lipsky, 1983).

A sampling frame of eligible study participants was compiled through professional networks, contact information on institutional websites, and snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The sample size mirrors other research on elite higher education (e.g., Reay et al., 2009). Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one to two hours (Patton, 2015). At the beginning of the interview, participants were invited to describe the admissions process and the considerations within that process in an unguided manner to obtain their own account of the process and values without prompting from the interviewer. Sometimes, the starter question of "Could you please tell me about your involvement in the admissions process and what you do?" followed by "why is it that you do things this way? What are you trying to achieve?" elicited ample information without significantly further prompting. Where necessary, the interview script used episodic (i.e., scenario) questions to elicit multi-informational perspectives (Flick, 2000; 2018).

## *Analysis*

We used a horizontal comparative case study approach for analysis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This is useful to shed light on underlying mechanisms that are not so easily decipherable when analyzing each context in isolation (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This allowed us to utilize qualitative data to elucidate policy mechanisms in contextual and nuanced ways (Maxwell, 2020). After coding each interview transcript line-by-line, we then combined codes into larger themes through an axial coding process (Charmaz, 2014). Using organizational system themes, we then analyzed the decision-making mechanisms with particular attention to how admissions selectors were influenced (or not) by environmental or internal organizational factors. For example, we coded data when an Ivy League admissions selector mentioned they adhered to a specific gender ratio because of on-campus accommodations restrictions. Organizational social systems theory typology provides an analytical tool for categorizing and describing the larger themes that emerged from comparative contextual analysis. We used larger themes to create the resulting theoretical implications.

We used other forms of data to triangulate understanding to increase trustworthiness, including previous ethnographic observations from Oxbridge admissions decision meetings, Ivy League recruiting campus tours, and field-level admissions selector conferences. These additional experiences and data provided further ways to challenge and confirm general empirical

results. For more information on ways complementary data were gathered and utilized to triangulate results, please see (Mountford-Zimdars, 2016).

# Findings

Our results show how the professional background of admissions selectors shape their decision-making heuristics and systems-orientation of organizations. While interaction between system and individual is reciprocal to some degree our study focuses on how systems influence individual behaviour. The independent professional orientation of the academic profession influences how faculty navigate the complexity of admissions decisions differently from the more constrained and less autonomous approach of the professional admissions staff. The approaches and contexts of the two different professions profoundly impact the way admissions selection micro-processes are executed and explain differences in the values and expectations the systems serve. The professionalization background of admissions selector and organizational system-orientation are integral to admissions selection but is undertheorized in educational research and unexplored in organizational research.

## *Ivy League institutions: Professionalized staff working in open systems*

One of the major differences in how English and US admissions selectors viewed their criteria for selection was the variability with which extracurricular activities and experiences influenced selectors' perspectives on candidates. The Ivy League selectors mentioned a "holistic review" process that took into account non-academic characteristics such as talents, experiences, identities, and organizational needs. One Ivy League selector described their institution's approach as: "We try to look for people who would bring us diverse talents and interests—all, we hope, with energy and ambition." This complex, opaque, and amorphous set of admissions criteria means that US admissions selectors are selecting a class (Stevens, 2007). Admissions staff are not only admitting the most academically talented individual students, but they also must meet the needs of other intra-institutional units and actors that require a diverse set of talents and interests.

Selectors in the US had to meet the unique wants and needs of academic and extracurricular organizational units external to their admissions office. One example mentioned by all of the Ivy League selectors was the need music departments had for specific instrumentalists. For example, one Ivy League selector said:

> If the music department does come to us and say, "you know, we really need a harpist this year," or whatever it is, we'll keep an eye out for one […] there are things that need to keep, sort of going at the university for it to be what it is, and so those are considerations that we have to bring in to the [admissions] committee room.

Selecting for instrumental talent served as a generalizable metaphor participants used to explain the complexity, sensitivity, and contextualization of undergraduate admissions meeting the needs of multiple intra-institutional units and actors.

While musical talent is an organizational need that straddles both academic and extracurricular needs, athletic talent is purely for extracurricular purposes. Admissions professionals had to negotiate recruiting student athletes that met academic standards, while at the same time, met athletic department desires. The importance of intercollegiate athletics in US higher education is largely created from perceived external influence from major donors and organizational field image competition (Baumer & Zimbalist, 2019). To manage this external influence, an Ivy League selector described why the negotiation between athletic departments and admissions professionals was necessary because "[…] the coaches go out and select these kids, and usually the academic credentials are much lower than the rest of the class."

Individual talents and experiences are not the only organizational priorities considered in admissions in the Ivy League context. Admissions selectors also have pressure to consider "legacy" students (i.e., prospective students who have a familial connection to the institution) and those who have the capacity for major financial donations. An Ivy League selector describes the influence of legacy students and the development (i.e., fundraising) office by stating:

> I mean, we do consider the fact that students might be legacies […] they [prospective students] still have to meet the, kind of, the [student demographic] profile of students that we're looking for. […] but it is something that we do consider. And then, of course, yes, we do have a development office, as do all institutions, and that's also a consideration.

Another Ivy League selector from a different institution described legacy students, and those with office of development connections, differently:

> […] their parents are being cultivated and are in the position to give a, you know, a monstrous amount of money […] that's really going to matter to the school in some way. And those kids, there's very few of them, but I think the standards are lowest for those students.

Admissions selectors in Ivy League universities must consider non-academic and extracurricular characteristics of students to meet the needs of intra-organizational constituents. The influence on status and economic power can be rationalized as the private (i.e., independent) governance structure of the Ivy League institutions compared to their public university peers, and the need for non-governmental subsidies to finance the institution (Baumer & Zimbalist, 2019).

Linking admissions decisions with potential donations is an illegitimate practice in Oxbridge because academic selectors are not accountable to environmental/intra-institutional influences as the admissions professionals in the US.

Admissions professionals were also accountable to non-academically related, on-campus housing capacity. One Ivy League admissions selector mentioned the need for specific gender ratios in a new first-year class due to the current on-campus housing capacity. Considering most university housing in England operates with single-occupancy rooms and could accommodate any gender, Oxbridge universities are not bound by gender capacity issues like their Ivy League counterparts that have mostly double-occupancy, gendered housing accommodations. An Ivy League selector indicated the importance of this gender requirement in the admissions context, and said, "the only number that really matters in the process is the number of beds we have in the freshman class." This intra-organizational environmental influence seemed frivolous to the Oxbridge selectors. For example, when asked about gender balance in admissions, two different Oxbridge selectors replied, "of course not" and "No, no, no. No—we can't do that, I mean yah […] we don't have a gender balance or ethnic balance or anything of that kind."

Ivy League admissions selection is described as holistic; but from an organizational perspective, contextualizing admissions processes and selection is operationalized as having to satisfy numerous intra-organizational, environmental priorities and constituents, such as housing allotment, musical/athletic talent, and fundraising opportunities. While holistic review allows institutions to admit historically marginalized students (e.g., Black and Latinx students, women in STEM, low-income students; Bastedo, 2021) it also allows environmental actors including alumni, policy makers and the media to influence admissions decisions to reproduce inequality through legacy admissions which privileges wealthy and connected prospective students.

## *Oxbridge: Autonomous professors working in cybernetic systems*

Unlike Ivy League institutions, the admissions selectors at Oxbridge were all academic faculty who seek to admit students based on academic ability and potential. While administrative staff organize admissions processes, the authority for admittance relies within agreement between the academic faculty by discipline (e.g., engineering, psychology, chemistry) and the college (e.g., Brasenose, Christ Church, Downing, Magdalen). Because undergraduate admission decisions are executed by faculty members and is only determined by discipline, the process of admissions selection at Oxbridge is not susceptible to as much intra-organizational environmental influence as Ivy League admissions processes and decisions. However, when a narrowly defined model of an "academically successful-minded" student is reproduced, often there are implicit measures of race, class, and gender that are not addressed in the present image of an implied student (Star-Glass, 2020).

Academic ability is the primary desire for Oxbridge admission selection, but it is defined quite differently in different disciplines. The admissions process for prospective students often relies on an individual interview that has significant weight on the applicant's future admission. Oxbridge selectors had various ways of evaluating prospective students for academic ability,

but there were consistent underlying themes that expressed values, expectations, and logics. Selectors from Oxbridge chose applicants for admission based on academic ability and predicted success within the unique pedagogical approach of the Oxbridge tutorial system.

Even though all candidates submit their current and teacher-predicted grades in their school-leaving examinations, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades, and personal statements, faculty members conduct individual interviews with applicants in order to better evaluate students' academic capabilities. One Mathematics professor discussed how the interview is structured:

> We ask some about Maths. We don't ask them anything personal except for some space-fillers to start off, especially when it is the candidate's first interview. Something just to set them at ease and start them off.

The Mathematics Oxbridge selector went on to describe the types of Mathematics problems and questions they asked prospective students. Unlike Ivy League selectors, the Oxbridge admissions selector was not concerned about non-academic information about the student such as extracurriculars, their propensity for community service, or their family connections. Similarly, another Oxbridge selector described the individual interview as:

> […] to be honest, I haven't considered at all a person's wider contribution to [Oxbridge] in a wider sense. I mean, we read the personal statement, but, yeah, but to be on the safe side, you only think academically.

In contrast, an Ivy League Selector mentioned how they measured student merit as potential accomplishments students have in their personal and professional lives decades after they graduate. They use institutional record-keeping publications (e.g., yearbooks) to remind new professional admissions staff of the type of student they are trying to recruit and admit. When this Ivy League selector hires new admissions staff, they give them a yearbook and tell them, "[…] this is the first marker of whether we've done a good job; not how they do in the classroom."

The type of leadership qualities the Ivy League selector looked for in undergraduate students was exactly the opposite of what Oxbridge selectors were interested in having as a student. When reflecting on the type of student that exemplifies leadership qualities in their interview, one Oxbridge selector said:

> […] that person would run everything, socialize and everything and probably get a 2:2 *[low academic grade]*. Because they would just have a ball. And you could see them fitting in. And you could see them love being in [Oxbridge institution]. But, actually, the college did not want that either. And being a great member of the JCR [Junior Common Room; community for undergraduates], I think, is a euphemism for being a great socialite, but not actually that serious about your academic work.

This Oxbridge selector went on to explain how this type of student did not gain admission in the academic-led assessment process.

A social scientist Oxbridge professor described a student who did not gain admission because he lacked the critical reasoning skills necessary to pass the admissions interview. They described the interview by saying: "We asked him, 'Why do we celebrate weddings?' and he talked about two people being in love and everyone is happy. So, you rephrase it—but it was very much one or two sentence answers that you got." This type of critical reasoning, being tested in the admissions interview, exemplifies the type of intellectual expectations Oxbridge admissions selectors have of the young adults in question, along with the social capital understandings that must be conveyed. The academic ability needed for successful admittance is not reliant on scores, grades, and content knowledge alone, but also on the ability to communicate sophisticated academic and social knowledge; or, as an Oxbridge selector said, "you want to put someone through the paces at the interview and I think that is fair enough, actually."

# Discussion

Access to elite higher education is a common topic of sociological and educational research. However, it has not been previously interrogated how the professional background of admissions selectors shapes admissions decisions and thus shapes organizational social systems. In this paper we take a novel, comparative approach to this established line of inquiry using new and different theoretical orientations of professional and organizational systems theory. We used an internationally comparative approach, looking at two highly-stratified contexts of elite higher education with a particular focus on how professional status and organizational influences impact how professional service staff in the US and academic faculty at Oxbridge make admissions decisions. This in turn, provides insights into how professions shape organizational social systems, in this case through their selection choices.

## *Theoretical contribution*

### Self-regulation

Following Abbott's (1988) work on the sociology of professions academic faculty is characterized as a high-status profession employing task autonomy. Oxbridge academics are particularly close to the ideal-typical characterization (Weber, 1913/1988). With such high task autonomy, academic faculty can control expertise and cement their role in the information processing as an organizational sub-unit within a self-regulated cybernetic system (Birnbaum, 1988; Boulding, 1956; DeYoung & Krueger, 2018). Overall, independence and self-regulation allow academic selectors within the cybernetic system of Oxbridge to have significant oversight and autonomy over undergraduate admissions. Because academic selectors are protected from intra-organizational and external influences, they have the autonomy to admit students from their narrowly defined predictions of academic success. However, because

there is little organizational requirement for environmental adaptation, research continuously shows how the Oxbridge cybernetic admissions system has continued to reproduce social advantage when looking at the profile of admitted students (Coughlan, 2018). We propose that a contributing factor is likely the logic of the cybernetic admissions system as it is conducive to homophily and it depends on the willingness of academic peers to challenge each other's conceptions of merit.

**External influence**

Professional staff selectors in the US are illustrative of the professionalization and specialization of role function in complex modern organizations. Admissions officers have lower task autonomy within their institution and their role is aligned to meet the needs of their employing institution (Khurana, 2007). Professional selectors must negotiate with external influences (e.g., alumni relations officers, fundraisers, music directors, athletic coaches) to create a class that meets the various goals of many intra-organizational offices and actors. Because there is such a permeable boundary between admissions selection and other organizational actors due to professional selectors' lower task autonomous position, the system created is one that is "open" to environmental influence (Boulding, 1956).

**Professions and systems**

By connecting the sociology of professions and systems theory we are better able to explain how the organizational social systems are created and sustained through the profession of the admissions selectors in elite university contexts in the US and England. For example, we can account for the distinct US focus on alumni contributions, as a factor of an open system responding to a range of external influences. This contrasts with the Oxbridge narrow-defined understanding of individual academic qualifications without regard for extracurricular factors or other intra-organizational needs.

By pioneering this theoretical linkage of organizational theories, we may be of use to other organizational scholars seeking to understand the connection between professions and the gradience of openness and self-regulation in the accompanying organizational social systems. Understanding this connection could assist in understanding heuristic and decision-making in other organizational contexts such as healthcare, politics, law enforcement, etc. For example, some hospitals are led by medical professionals and others by professionalized healthcare management staff (Goodall, 2011). The same happens in national ministries or division where there are both politically appointed staff and career staff that often have overlapping function and responsibility (Pinto et al., 2018). Our research would suggest that professional background and level of task autonomy shapes the type of organizational social system that is created to influence decision making.

## *Caveats to knowledge claims*

The social world is complex and when comparing across countries, there are always many contextual and systemic differences at play making policy borrowing a challenging endeavor.

It would be naive to consider academic attainment and credentials as occurring in a vacuum. For example, attainment in England is strongly related to social background (Strand 2021). Indeed, previous research has demonstrated how scoring high on a Bourdieusian inspired quiz on high culture increased admissions chances for applicants in Arts but not Science subjects (Zimdars et al., 2009). We also know that middle class parents provide opportunities to their children which will enhance their academic credentials and test scores, let it be tutoring, private schooling or participation in particular (selective) state schools. At the same time, we also know that middle class parents in the US play to the criteria of elite admissions systems. For example, a majority of athletic considerations in admissions benefit already privileged young people (Arcidiacono et al., 2019). Thus, we do not simply assume that academic credentials or non-academic criteria are intrinsically fairer for widening access to elite higher education as both systems can be played by upper and middle classes wishing to pass on their position to their children (Lareau, 2011).

Finally, the field of social stratification research is a well-ploughed and rigorous field with many knowledge claims based on large-scale data analyses. Plenty of focus is rightly on the "outcomes" of the organisational and other processes that occur in countries that tend to result in social reproduction. Indeed, we have reviewed the empirical work in the present paper showing that the outcomes of the different selection systems tend to reproduce social inequality in both the professional-led Ivy League system and in the academic-led Oxbridge system. However, we believe that there is merit in seeking to understand *how* different systems create these results which can be uniquely understood using qualitive methodological traditions. We aim to contribute to knowledge that the closer alignment to the open organisational system in the US and the closer alignment to the cybernetic organisational system in England allow practitioners and policy makers to think about the different channels in each system to influence practice.

## *Implications for practice*

The cybernetic structures within which the Oxbridge selectors operate are heavily influenced by the environment to the extent that they can retain autonomy in decision making. This means media investigations and changing public opinion on demographic realities could catalyze change in admissions processes so long as the system could be returned thereafter to self-regulation by internal actors. Therefore, it is important to engage the professional communities of practice that academic selectors engage with through their discipline.

Academic faculty have intense loyalty to their academic disciplines, so it makes more sense to influence faculty through their own academic organizations or learned societies. Some prestigious learned societies in England are already putting broadening access on the agenda of the professional project. The UK Professional Standard Framework, a framework all newer academics encounter as part of developing their teaching practice, also features a value to "Promote participation in higher education and equality of opportunity for learners"

(AdvanceHE, 2019, professional value 2). As long as these associations are able to represent and influence their internal audience of academic faculty from their respective disciplines, there is opportunity for value systems change leading to policy and practice change within elite university admissions decisions made from faculty.

Another opportunity for change comes from learning from other professional projects. Here, through a process Liu calls "diagnostic coproduction" (Liu, 2018). Professionals have come to recognize that "clients and patients, devices and instruments, concepts, and institutional and spatial arrangements" are additional legitimate sources of expertise (Eyal, 2013, p. 873). Thus, networks have emerged connecting professionals and laypersons. This is the case in healthcare (e.g., patient committees) and earlier stages of schooling (e.g., parent-teacher committees). While many modern universities often have some structure of involving students in committees, it is perhaps surprising that there have been no demands for societal and student stakeholders to be part of the admissions project. Here we see potential to learn from other professional projects that have democratized and co-created expertise. Widening the expertise of admissions selection to include more than just academic faculty could introduce fissures of perspective that could provide diverse and varied definitions of academic knowledge and predictive academic success.

# Conclusion

Elite universities in both England and the US have contributed to socially stratified and unequal societies (Britton et al., 2019; Chetty et al. 2017; Chetty et al., 2023). Alternatively, elite university education could catalyze social mobility if they were to admit and graduate a more equitable and diverse student population (Britton et al. 2019; Chetty et al. 2017). One way to begin addressing social inequality in elite university admissions is to look at the admissions processes and the socially embedded organizational systems and actors that they operate within.

The present article sheds light on the detailed mechanisms of how admissions decisions are reached within the cybernetic Oxbridge system through academic selectors and within the open systems of US elite admissions managed by professional service staff. The two admissions processes operate within two different organizational social systems shaped by the professional background of the admissions selectors themselves. In the US, professional admissions selectors respond to external pressure and intra-organizational needs within an open organizational system, while in England the academic faculty function within a cybernetic system designed to self-regulate and shield selectors from responding to external stimuli. The analysis thus offers a potential springboard for further theoretical applications of our linkage of professions, organizational theory and decision making as well as provides opportunity for different intervention points for policy makers wishing to create more equitable change in elite university admissions in either system.

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# Governing Professionals Through Discourses of Resilience and Value: A New Legitimation for Ontario Pharmacists

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## Abstract

In a neoliberal turn, the government of Ontario cut more than $750 million in funds that were traditionally received by pharmacies through dispensing medication. These funds were replaced with a state-funded program that would reimburse pharmacists for professional services related to patient care. The problem facing professional elites from Ontario pharmacy's advocacy body was how to govern members of a self-regulating profession to switch subjectivities (identities) from the traditional dispenser of medication to providing patient care for profit. We address a gap in the literature and pose the question, how are the rank and file of allied healthcare professions governed by professional elites to become responsibilized subjects who will adopt state/profession agendas? Using a Foucauldian governmentality framework, our findings reveal that the rank and file are governed by elites through two technologies: resilience and value making possible a new "legitimate" pharmacist subjectivity related to the market and health care sustainability.

## Keywords

Pharmacy, governmentality, professional identity, neoliberalism, Foucault

# Introduction

Increasing healthcare expenditures have prompted many Western nations to adopt strategies from the business sector in order to curtail costs. However, initiatives such as new public management (NPM), characterized by managerial and organizational logics, are often in conflict with traditional notions of occupational professionalism such as autonomy, collegiality, and trust (Evetts, 2011; Numerato et al., 2012). Evetts (2011) describes this shift towards organizational practices as "new professionalism." She recognizes the power of business logics to transform professional identities, structures and practices, but also argues that within these tensions of old and new professionalism there is continuity as well as change. In this paper, we argue that one element of professionalism that represents both continuity and change is how professionals legitimize themselves in the eyes of the state, professions, and their clientele (Fournier, 1999).

Johnson (1993) suggests that professionals are integral to modern state governance. Early professions such as medicine, surgery, law, and accountancy became more than occupational strategies of control—expertise became an extension of the state's capacity to govern by constituting autonomous subjects who conducted themselves in "appropriate" ways. Rather than the state ruling from above, in what Foucault termed a "sovereign" type of power where "obedience to the law [was conceived] as the sole source of legitimate rule," government manages its population through the citizen-subject (Johnson, 1993. p.141). Thus professions and the construction of the self-governing subject became central to micro-processes of state power as the state granted professions greater autonomy, self-regulation, and social status (Johnson, 1993). However, as Fournier (1999) agrees, professionals are not located "outside of the power/knowledge regime [they] serve to constitute and reproduce" (p. 284). Because they are "carrier[s] of the art of liberal governmentality," they must conduct themselves "in ways that are recognized as legitimate and worthy of the professional label." (p. 285) Thus, professionals are both the "governor and the governed," establishing their legitimacy through criteria situated within traditional notions of liberal governmentality such as respecting "truth, public good, [and] social welfare" (p. 289). Liberalism emerges as a political philosophy characterized by the limits it places on the exercise of political power, governing the population from a distance through the reproduction of a self-regulating, autonomous subject (Johnson, 1993; Rose & Miller, 1992).

At the same time, neoliberalism, with its focus on the supremacy of the market, opens up new ways by which professionals can establish legitimacy, allowing them to re-establish themselves according to market logic. The neoliberal state reconfigures expertise under neoliberalism with its rationalities of "competition, accountability and consumer demand" (Rose, 1993, p. 284). As in the welfare state, expertise is still an essential mechanism of liberal governance, but state actors aim to control healthcare costs in various ways (Adams, 2017; Bourgeault & Merritt, 2015; Fournier, 2000; Nancarrow & Borthwick, 2005). In the middle of

competing logics of occupational and organizational professionalism, "old school professionals" are not above the marketplace and must transform into the "right" type of professional who will also be responsible for healthcare reform (Dent & Whitehead, 2002; Moffatt et al., 2014). Specifically, the "new" professional constructed through the adoption of market discourses must take on managerial and entrepreneurial subjectivities (the Foucauldian word for identity) in order to be seen as legitimate (Dent & Whitehead, 2002). But the demand for healthcare professionals to become more managerial or enterprising can be seen as threatening to traditional notions of autonomy leading to deprofessionalization and resistance to organizational change (Doolin, 2002; Forbes et al., 2004; Haug, 1972; Moffatt et al., 2014; Muzio et al., 2019). While this theory has merit on the surface, the deprofessionalization argument may be too unidirectional and deterministic and may overlook opportunities present within the confluence of organizational and occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2011; see also Fournier, 2000). Managerialism is both "multilayered and multidimensional" and some professions and practitioners may use managerial practices as ways to gain status and further careers (Moffatt et al., 2014; Nancarrow & Borthwick, 2005; Pickard, 2009). In this paper, we argue that neoliberal healthcare reform could result in the *reprofessionalization* of lower status professions pursuing re-legitimization through the market and healthcare reform.

The main question addressed in this paper is how self-governing professionals are constituted by professional leaders as responsibilized subjects who will take on healthcare reform. We draw from the Foucauldian analysis of Moffatt et al. (2014) who investigated how discourses of productivity circulate through NHS policy documents to govern healthcare professionals. But rather than investigating state policy documents for technologies of self (ways of constructing one's professional identity), we instead examine how the rank and file are governed by professional elites using the pharmacy profession in Ontario, Canada as a case study. We first provide background on how neoliberal healthcare reform resulted in pharmacy's reprofessionalization. We then elaborate on "governmentality" both as a theoretical framework and a method of analysis, describing how our Foucauldian archive of the writings of professional elites was constructed and analyzed. Finally, we present and discuss the research findings and offer conclusions relating to issues affecting professions in the neoliberal era.

# Background

In 2002, the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada (the "Romanow Report") reviewed the state of Canadian medicare and made recommendations to improve quality and efficiency. The Report problematized the increasing costs of medicare as unsustainable, suggesting that the future of Canadian healthcare depended upon decisive action based on "better management practices, more agile and collaborative institutions and a stronger focus on prevention," all of which were predicted to generate "significant savings" (Romanow, 2002, p. xvi). In neoliberal logic, the solution to Canada's healthcare ills devolved to individual healthcare consumers and professionals (Lalonde, 1974). Consistent with the autonomous, self-regulating citizen, Canadians were expected to govern themselves responsibly by keeping

healthy, using the system "prudently," and supporting it through their actions and tax dollars (Romanow, 2002, p. 50). Responsibilized professionals were expected to work with governments, the public, and each other to improve the quality of services, ensure patient safety, and "exercise prudent management and careful stewardship of [finite] resources" (Romanow, 2002, p. 51).

Prescription drug costs are a significant healthcare expenditure. Approximately 60% of Canadian healthcare spending is divided among hospitals (28.3%), drugs (15.7%), and physicians (15.1%), with drug costs the second largest share of costs since 1997. Currently drug costs are predicted to have the highest growth rate of the three top expenditures (CIHI, 2018). Drugs have socio-economic benefits in treating acute and chronic illnesses, replacing intensive surgeries, and allowing recovery from illnesses at home rather than in hospitals. But to realize these benefits, prescription drugs were to be integrated into the healthcare system in a manner ensuring that they are "appropriately prescribed, utilized and that the costs can be contained" (Romanow, 2002, p. 190). The Report suggested that inappropriate drug use and errors could cost the healthcare system up to nine billion dollars a year and that managing and containing prescription drug costs would be more acceptable to Canadians than limiting drug coverage or introducing deductibles. It recommended linking medication management to primary healthcare in a "health management approach" where an individual's health is managed by a team of experts, including a larger role for the pharmacist to ensure effective and appropriate use of prescription medication. Romanow also called for flexibility in roles and responsibilities of professionals, since rigid professional boundaries disrupt medication programs that require networks of providers to work together to address patient needs.

The pharmacy profession in Canada responded to the Report in a national publication: "Blueprint for Pharmacy: Designing the Future Together." Pharmacists were presented as vital members of the healthcare team and medication experts, playing a key role in healthcare sustainability (CPhA, 2008). The Blueprint agreed that pharmacist interventions could improve access to primary care, the safety of the medication-use system, and rational use of medications; and to realize this vision, pharmacists must use the full range of their knowledge and skills, taking on new roles and responsibilities with appropriate financial compensation. Thus, the goal of the state to provide high quality and affordable healthcare was "translated" into the goal of the pharmacy profession to realize a reprofessionalization project within the context of healthcare sustainability. Historically, elitist medicine generated resistance to being managed by the state (Coburn et al., 1997), but pharmacy, after a half-century of being deprofessionalized as a business, finally aligned with the state. Pharmacy's values and the state now coincided such that "a network [was] composed that enables rule at a distance" (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 184). Responsibility for healthcare sustainability devolved to the individual pharmacist who was constructed in the Blueprint as being an "agent of change;" it was recognized that this involved a significant shift in the culture of pharmacy, focusing less

on drugs than the patient. The pharmacist would become the medication expert rather than a mere dispenser of medication.

In Canada, professions are regulated provincially, and in 2009, Ontario, the most populous province, made amendments to Ontario's Regulated Health Professions Act (RHPA) expanding pharmacy's scope of practice. Concurrently, through a drug system review called the Transparent Drug System for Patients Act (Bill 102), the state also cut $750 million in funds traditionally received by Ontario community pharmacists for dispensing medication. These interventions by state actors produced lower-cost healthcare. It was also predicted that an expanded scope of practice could potentially reduce demand on an overburdened healthcare system and allow pharmacists to perform minor medical tasks to ease wait times for patients seeking physician care. (Randall et al., 2015)

Professional advocacy groups such as the Ontario Pharmacists Association (OPA) had their objectives met with the amendments to the RHPA. They had lobbied extensively for an expanded scope of practice allowing community pharmacists to take on formerly restricted roles such as adapting, modifying and extending an existing prescription, administering drugs through injection and inhalation, and performing a procedure on tissue below the dermis. Pharmacists were granted authorization to initiate drugs for smoking cessation, and recently, Ontario community pharmacists can prescribe for minor ailments (Ferguson, 2019; HPRAC, 2009). OPA supports all Ontario pharmacists, but interventions were aimed at community rather than hospital pharmacists because public drug program spending does not include drugs dispensed in hospitals, cancer agencies, or other special programs (CIHI, 2018). OPA predicted that amendments expanding pharmacist roles could potentially save the Ontario government more than $130 million annually (Randall et al., 2015).

OPA understood that the loss of dispensing funds would severely impact the business of pharmacy, as they are a major revenue stream. Except for the province of Quebec, pharmacists at that time were not reimbursed for professional services other than dispensing. OPA thus vigorously and successfully lobbied the government to mitigate the loss of revenue with $100 million in funding with which pharmacists would be paid by the state to provide professional services such as medication reviews (Darby, 2012). MedsCheck, as this professional service is now known, was the first medication review service to be reimbursed by a publicly-funded drug plan in Canada (MacKeigan et al., 2017). It allows pharmacists to bill the provincial medicare drug plan, the Ontario Drug Benefit (ODB) for an annual medication review service for patients taking three or more prescription medications for chronic medical conditions.

Billing for medication counselling, as part of an expanded scope of practice, signaled a new chapter for a profession that experienced significant deprofessionalization over the decades. What was needed was the support of community pharmacists whom the cuts directly impacted. The problem for OPA was how to govern members to accept the change by adopting new roles not related to dispensing. Prior to the neoliberal turn, community pharmacists

working for corporations had little autonomy to engage in non-revenue generating activities such as patient care compared to the more profitable business of dispensing (Muzzin et al., 1998; Volume et al., 1999). OPA is Canada's largest pharmacy advocacy organization with a voluntary membership of more than 10,000 members representing approximately half of Ontario's registered pharmacy professionals (including pharmacists, pharmacy students, and pharmacy technicians) (OPA, 2023). Waring (2014) nuances Freidson's (1985) thesis about restratification of professions into hierarchies of elites and rank and file as a strategy to maintain autonomy in an increasingly bureaucratic workplace. He categorizes members of professional advocacy groups as acting as intermediaries between the state and the profession that have the task of "govern[ing] their colleagues in line with corporate [or state] interests" (p. 694). OPA does not have the same power to enforce changes as the Ontario College of Pharmacists (the regulatory body). Instead, it chose persuasion via its journal. In Foucauldian terms, despite its role, OPA elites do not wield ultimate sovereign power in a "top-down" process; instead, professional elites govern through what Foucault called "productive power" to produce the changes for which they advocate. Under new professionalism, there is a cultural shift in state/profession governance which promotes the responsibilized professional who will ensure healthcare sustainability through a professional ethic of self-governance. Our discourse analysis of the journal of the Ontario pharmacy advocacy organization promised to determine how pharmacy elites governed its members at arm's length through discourses related to the market.

# Theoretical perspective and methods

Analyzing text for Foucauldian "governmentality" can make visible or problematize a phenomenon that appears "natural" through various techniques and practices based in power/knowledge relations. Foucauldian methods allow one to "[stand] against the current of received wisdom [...] [by] introducing a kind of awkwardness into the fabric of one's experience, of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter" (Rose, 1999, p. 20). We chose Nikolas Rose's (1999) method of governmental inquiry to guide our research. According to Rose (1999),

> to analyse political power through the analytics of governmentality is not to start from the apparently obvious historical or sociological question: what happened and why? It is to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques (p. 20).

This analytic of governmentality forms a template to address our main research question (how does the profession govern its members to become the legitimate, or "right" type of pharmacist for the neoliberal turn). It does this by answering key questions: who were the authorities? (the pharmacy profession and the state); what did they want to happen? (pharmacists to adopt and adapt to changes in the profession); how was this problem defined to

the actors in the network? (pharmacists must be responsible for healthcare reform); and what techniques were used to achieve their objective? The last question is clarified by examining the strategies and techniques that govern pharmacists to become self-governing, responsibilized subjects. Our discourse analysis used an archive of texts produced by professional elites. We reasoned that this approach would reveal an ensemble (or network) of technologies (or toolkit) used by OPA to govern rank and file members to achieve its objectives. This ensemble is defined as

> forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, vocabularies, types of authority, forms of judgement, architectural forms, human capacities, non-human objects and devices [...] traversed and transected by aspirations to achieve certain outcomes in terms of the conduct of the governed. (Rose, 1999, p. 52)

We began with the construction of the archive by selecting which texts would be used to start the analysis. The OPA journal, *The Ontario Pharmacist*, was a logical starting point since our research question is how the advocacy body governs its members in times of change. Their function is to advocate the interests of the profession and govern the rank and file accordingly. OPA's journal highlighted both. The first author, who has worked as an Ontario pharmacist, knew that pharmacists would turn to OPA's journal to get an authoritative view when faced with significant changes such as an expanded scope of practice and government cutbacks threatening pharmacy revenue. Our approach focused on discovering how the advocacy body governs its members (not how individual pharmacists align with governing discourses). Articles published from 2006 to 2016 were selected to capture discourses just before changes to Ontario's public drug system and the following transitional period in which pharmacists were governed to adopt proposed changes in the profession.

The first author (TM) began with a sample of texts between 2006 and 2016, identifying repeating narratives associated with change. The three authors agreed that the concept of resilience appeared with regularity and should be the entry point for identifying the ensemble of technologies presented to Ontario pharmacists. The entire archive was then coded by TM for how the pharmacy profession governed its members to become resilient subjects during this period by taking on a new/different professional subjectivity. When the resilience discourse was located in the text, the following questions were asked: how did the notion of resilience appear as a way to govern pharmacists, and how does resilience "act upon individuals' ability to steer themselves by shaping their desires and aspirations?" (Brady, 2016, p. 19). To expedite the search through a decade of pharmacy journals, the Command-S function was used to find coding search terms related to the concept of resilience in words such as: adaptability, change, challenges, embrace, evaluate, future, plan, preparedness, resilient, succeed, uptake, and uncertain. When new key words were found, all articles were researched to ensure that we did not miss insights. Once it was confirmed that the article referred to changes in the profession, we recorded information in the coding guide by author(s), their position in the organization, and key words and phrases in the analysis.

The next step after organizing the data was to analyse the text, identifying the governance process (Kuper et al., 2013). We followed Rose (1999), who instructs that one must look at the text not for its meaning, but how "[it] functions in connection with other things, what it makes possible, the surfaces, networks and circuits around which it flows" (p. 29). In discovering how the word "change" was operationalized to govern pharmacists to become resilient subjects, we found that constructing a resilient subject was not the only technology (or techniques) governing pharmacists in the archive. Analysis of the coding sheets revealed that another word, "value," appeared regularly in the text. We propose that "resilience" and "value" were part of what Foucault called a discursive formation defined as a "[regularity] between a number of statements [in which] one can define an order, correlations, positions, [...] functionings [and] transformations" (Foucault, 1972, p. 38). The discursive formation, or "mantra," related to value that appeared throughout the archive will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. Altogether, 119 articles were analyzed for concepts related to resilience and value as governing technologies. We cite representative examples of this analysis in the results section. OPA granted permission to use the journal for research purposes. The "regime of truth" or "logic" that emerged shows that OPA elites govern members through the neoliberal technologies of resilience and value. Below, we elaborate on the technology of resilience as a way to govern pharmacists to adapt to a changing professional environment, and in the section following, on value as a discourse that enables pharmacists to break free of the identity of a "pill counter" to become an expert in patient care.

# Governing through the technology of resilience and openness to change

As noted, drug system reform (Bill 102) resulted in major revenue loss for pharmacies. As one commentator pointed out,

> [t]he decision to reduce generic drug pricing and eliminate professional allowances [...] will significantly outweigh the increase in dispensing fees or future professional services, making the provision of health care services [...] difficult and will have long-term negative implications for the profession and the businesses that support it (Miller, 2010, p.30).

However, as pharmacy elites went on to say, the provision of $100 million in funding for professional services and increased scope of practice changes provided pharmacists with at least some additional revenue for clinical services not related to dispensing. Here pharmacy elites were encouraging pharmacists to transition from being medication dispensers to providing clinical services as a legitimate source of revenue. Another commentator insisted that resistance was not helpful: "In the early years, much of the discussion [...] revolved around limited uptake by pharmacists. Questions were posed about the willingness of pharmacists to transition from dispensing towards the provision of clinical services" (Pojskic, 2013, p. 10).

Statements in the archive reveal how this professional governmentality operates in lockstep with the state through encouraging the production of active and responsible subjects, with resilience as one specific form of neoliberal self-governance. Our archival analysis reveals that OPA elites entice the individual pharmacist to become a resilient subject through various technologies such as the discourse of change, which appears repeatedly, functioning in multiple ways to produce a resilient subject. For example, change constructs the world as beyond our control, as if the only way to survive is knowing how to adapt. In the discursive formation that circulates throughout the archive, authorities construct the profession as adapting to change to escape a dystopia of strained relations between the state and the profession. In the OPA journal specifically, change is constructed as a constant ongoing process out of the profession's control, but one which heralds a visible utopic future *if* pharmacists adapt. The phrase "we live in interesting times" is mentioned more than once, reflecting this dystopic/utopic duality where change is constructed as a "blessing/curse." On the one hand, the government takes away professional allowances, but on the other, it allows pharmacists for the first time to bill for professional services other than dispensing (Burns, 2007a, p. 34). The implementation of Bill 102 was clearly recognized as negatively affecting the profession: "Pharmacies have been losing money as fast as they fill prescriptions. [...] The result is a crisis in the making. […] Some say they cannot stay in business much longer" (Edwards, 2006, p. 34). However, within this dystopic construction, professional elites emphasized a "silver lining." One dangled a "bright future" for those wanting to realize professional fulfillment in a tumultuous environment:

> It's difficult for anyone to know what's coming next [...] [and] these changes affect, in one way or another, how pharmacists practice and how they are compensated. It is truly an age of uncertainty. [...] [However], amidst this cacophony of issues and problems [...] [there are] opportunities for an expanded scope of practice for pharmacists. (Darby, 2008, p. 5)

The resilience discourse operates in tandem with change discourses about adapting during times of change. Together they attempt to govern the actions of pharmacists by limiting their options through a technology. Authors such as Joseph (2013, p. 43) label this formation with a political acronym, TINA (There Is No Alternative). As the discourse goes, changes to legislation occur quickly, arguably leaving pharmacists in a position where they have no choice but to adapt their business model from dispensing to one focused on providing clinical skills for profit. One writer in the pharmacy advocacy journal gives pharmacists only one option—to accept these changes: "Ontario's drug system reform regulations [...] have created an imperative for pharmacies to consider strategies to shift their workflow to one that is more patient-focused. The business model is evolving quickly and pharmacists have no choice but to keep up" (Malek, 2010a, p. 12). The "patient-centred" model is familiar in pharmacy publications and education over the past few decades, but here it becomes an imperative tied to state funding.

In the OPA archive, neoliberal technologies such as responsibility and reflexivity are woven together to support the construction of resilient pharmacists who govern themselves. In a neoliberal world, "resiliency and adaptability have become central techniques of the self" which require flexibility in managing "one's own risks" and being "innovative, adaptive and responsible" (O'Malley, 2010, p. 505). In a statement from the archive, pharmacists are exhorted to change through technologies of individualism, responsibilization, reflexivity and an appeal to the pharmacist's ethical self who will bring about the "greater good":

> In order for this change to happen, we must first reflect on how we, as pharmacists, are prepared to change. Are we willing to change how we practice, how we [...] take on new, more complex responsibilities? [...] This change is not just good for pharmacy. It is good for our patients. It is good for the viability of the health care system. It is also our responsibility as health professionals. (Burns, 2007b, p. 42)

The archive assumes that not all pharmacists are enthusiastic about the elite agenda and several archived articles emphasize that pharmacists who resist change must be convinced to be responsible members of a legitimate profession. One statement supports monetary encouragement over coercion in disciplining pharmacists who act "irresponsibly":

> Not all pharmacists, for a variety of reasons, will want to expand their activities, responsibly and accountably […] The proposed legislation and regulations should enable, rather than oblige, pharmacists to participate in enhanced activities. In spite of this, OPA asserts that professional activities are valuable services and need to be recognized as such with appropriate reimbursement. (Janecka, 2008, p. 7)

To summarize, professional elites reinforced the need for change through moral arguments that linked proposed practice shifts to responsiveness, social responsibility, and professional legitimacy (further elaborated below). Those who resist the uptake of new proposed practices are put in the untenable position of discursively couching their resistance in a plausible alternative for good patient care and responsible use of healthcare resources.

# Governing through the technology of value in neoliberalism

Interlocking with "resilience" in our archive, "value" forms part of a discursive formation that guides pharmacists to take on the state's agenda of professional sustainability. A mantra or discursive formation emerges from the archive: resilient pharmacists who go beyond the traditional dispensing role and provide professional services for profit can optimize patient outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and maintain the viability of the business of pharmacy. This set of discourses of "value" (added) circulates throughout the archive and makes possible the subject position (position in the division of labour) of the "patient care" pharmacist who is valued by the profession, patients, other healthcare professionals and government.

Arguably, "patient care" pharmacist discourse has been taken up since the emergence of pharmaceutical care in the 1990s. It stresses "the responsible provision of drug therapy for the purpose of achieving definite outcomes that improve a patient's quality of life" paralleling medical care and nursing care (Hepler & Strand, 1990). Judging by the archive (and sociological writing), before Covid-19, pharmacists' traditional relationship with patients has been somewhat invisible (e.g. McCormack, 1956). Only their business subjectivity was noted (and devalued) by sociologists in previous decades. Under neoliberalism, the new pharmacy subject position is recognized as of value under the logic of the market. As Davies and Bansel (2010) put it, "the market becomes the singular discourse through which individual and institutional acceptability will be recognized" (p. 5). Value operates throughout the archive to construct a "truth" about the new "patient care" pharmacist: he or she has value as an expert when performing a professional function that sustains pharmacy at the same time as it lowers healthcare costs under medicare. In the following archival statement, pharmacy leaders recognize that clinical skills are not a new professional jurisdiction, and celebrate how a state with a neoliberal agenda now recognizes the pharmacist's value as a professional (conflated with healthcare sustainability):

> While neither pharmaceutical opinions nor follow-up consultations are new services offered at the pharmacy level, the recognition of the value of these services by the Ontario government, and their willingness to remunerate for them are. Pharmacists can now do more to affect patient outcomes, improve and optimize patient care, and deliver cost savings to the health system, while being recognized for their evolving roles and the enormous impact they have on their patients. (Li & Malek, 2011, p. 7)

Historically, Ontario pharmacists have always offered their patients access to services and information over and above those related to dispensing, with these services being part and parcel of the pharmacy experience, done at little or no charge to the patient in the best interest of community healthcare (Muzzin & Hornosty, 1994). But in response to drug system reform, the elimination of professional allowances, and new opportunities presented by Bill 179, practitioners are urged to expand services as a way to prioritize valued patient care and demonstrate the skills and value of pharmacists which will also help offset the changes brought about by government.

In the OPA archive, professional services are touted as providing game-changing evidence of the pharmacists' value above and beyond dispensing. A certain "truth" emerges that centres *what* pharmaceutical knowledge counts. Pharmacists are now legitimated as neoliberal subjects who will lower healthcare costs by providing professional services for profit. In Foucauldian terms, a subject position is made possible by uptake of new discourses. The bottom line now is that pharmacists must govern themselves to reject the subject position of a dispenser and occupy the subject position of the patient care pharmacist who provides clinical skills for a fee. The "truth" for the pharmacist that emerges from the archive emphasizes the "value"

of clinical skills and patient care communication over traditional dispensing. As one professional elite anticipated:

> Pharmacists' training can take them well beyond the established professional boundaries. Pharmacists are equipped with the knowledge and expertise to do so much more than fill a prescription. Our real value comes from our ability to treat the whole patient. (Malek, 2010b, p.11)

Although pharmacy has been practiced in Ontario for over 150 years, these archival statements suggest pharmacists' role in healthcare is only now visible in the neoliberal agenda of lowering healthcare costs. OPA elites predict a professional utopia in which government goals of increased access and cost savings promise to increasingly recognize pharmacists' value and require that pharmacists do even more to reduce healthcare costs. According to one leader, "there is a growing awareness [...] that greater utilization of pharmacists is part of the solution for addressing the challenges that are facing health care" (Pojskic, 2012, p. 10). Notably, this is a never-ending process: the profession (consistent with this discursive formation) has come a long way in terms of expanding the role of the pharmacist beyond traditional dispensing, but even relatively recent regulatory changes may not realize the pharmacist's full potential. According to another archived article: "the authority to provide injection services [...] is a big win for pharmacy [...] but even with this change, pharmacists are not being utilized to their fullest capacity" (George, 2012, p. 17). This article also comments on how pharmacists' scope of practice continues to evolve within the government's agenda for driving down healthcare costs with reference to "public service" discourse, tying them together:

> Pharmacists can contribute significantly to better health outcomes, drive system and cost efficiencies through decreased wait times and fewer emergency department visits, and provide more timely access to the care that Ontarians want, need and deserve. Injection services, flu shots, the pharmaceutical opinion program, smoking cessation, and moving forward the authority to prescribe for minor common ailments such as uncomplicated ear infections and bladder or urinary tract infections—these will all improve community health and patient access while reducing system costs in a significant, tangible way. (George, 2012, p. 17)

This response to the new legislation has thus set the stage for increasing pharmacists' scope of practice, and within these changes establishing a more fully legitimized, valued pharmacist professional identity. An insider celebrates that after "Bill 179 was passed [...] it set in motion a process that would enable pharmacists to better realize their true potential through an increased scope of practice" (Malek, 2010a, p. 12), and pharmacists must be ready and willing to take up this discourse. In the recent global pandemic, pharmacy elites were well-positioned to reinforce the push for pharmacists to take on their role as "valued" healthcare profession-

als by enlisting ubiquitous pharmacies in vaccine roll-out programs, demonstrating the capacity to quickly pivot pharmacy operations to integrate long lines of patients requiring vaccinations (NPAC, 2021).

# Discussion and concluding thoughts

The dominance of organizational logics that underscore state programs such as NPM challenge traditional ideals regarding professional conduct, which were historically based on notions of occupational autonomy and collegiality, but have now expanded to include logics of the organization and the market (Evetts, 2011; Fournier, 1999; Pickard, 2009). New professionalism signals a shift in how professionals legitimize themselves within a network of liberal government discourses in which they are accountable to themselves and other constituents in the network including clients, the state and the market. Such accountability requires that professionals conduct themselves in ways that are currently considered legitimate. Sociological studies that investigate the impact of managerial practices on healthcare professions focus on outcomes such as deprofessionalization or proletarianization (Forbes et al., 2004; Numerato et al., 2012); however, these have been criticized for ignoring the ever-shifting historical or cultural contexts in which many entrepreneurial professionals practice (Numerato et al., 2012). Foucauldian governmentality approaches allow for a more nuanced investigation into state/professional relationships, offering ways to explore "the contours of power within [healthcare] reforms" (Moffatt et al., 2014). They provide a theoretical framework that assumes the fluid nature of power/knowledge relations within the network of discourses of liberal government. In this discursive formation, commodification of expertise under NPM does not necessarily signal "deregulation nor increasing intervention" by the state but a "rearticulation of the state-profession relationship; a shift in the focus of government concerns regarding expertise" (Johnson, 1993, p. 145). Rose (1993) concurs that expertise is reconfigured differently within neoliberalism because it "relocates expertise within a market governed by the rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand" (p. 285). In other words, although expertise has been commodified under market logics, it still remains an integral technology of governance (Johnson, 1993).

The Foucauldian concept of governmentality focuses not on institutions but on the *practices* of government (Joyce, 2001) or those specific mechanisms or technologies that allow for the operationalization of state initiatives and governing from a distance (Moffatt et al., 2014). Under neoliberalism, healthcare sustainability is operationalized not by top-down or direct control, but through the construction of the responsibilized, self-governing professional whose desires must be aligned with those of government programs and professional ambitions. This requires that professionals re-legitimize themselves and make themselves accountable through the rationalities of new professionalism. The problem for professions established in the welfare state that historically resisted change when initiated from above, is for elites to convince the rank and file to adopt new roles and subjectivities related to healthcare reform.

Our findings contribute to the sociological study of the professions in addressing gaps in our knowledge of how allied healthcare professionals are governed within their own professions by their own members. Unlike other governmentality studies that focus on how the state fashions medical professionals into managerial or enterprising subjects (Doolin, 2002; MacKinnon, 2000; Moffatt et al., 2014; Sheaff et al., 2004), we examined how pharmacists, as members of a historically self-regulating profession are governed by elites to adopt neoliberal state reform. Archives constructed from professional advocacy journals can provide rich data to track these power/knowledge relations. In our case study, we discovered how elites attempted to construct "legitimate" professional identities from narrowly-defined neoliberal "truths." Our findings reveal, in true governmentality fashion, that elites need not suppress professional freedom when they can provide incentives to embrace neoliberal policies. The rank and file are "free" to adopt subjectivities responsible for healthcare reform and discard traditional roles not valued under market logics.

In 2008, Canadian pharmacy translated federal programs of healthcare sustainability into its own professional space that aligned state objectives and their reprofessionalization project of pharmaceutical care. This positioned pharmacists as visible, resilient, and valued members within the healthcare team. But as noted, the role of "medication expert" or "patient care" pharmacist was not new for pharmacy. Neoliberal healthcare reform, 20 years after pharmaceutical care discourse was introduced, enabled Ontario pharmacists to finally shed their traditional identity as dispensers and compounders of medication and reprofessionalize as experts in pharmaceutical care. Our case study reveals the irony for pharmacy to reprofessionalize through neoliberal state policies. The (re)construction of clinical services as a commodity within market discourses was once a reason for its devaluation (in liberal professional discourses). Now new professionalism, as defined by the state, promises to *legitimize* pharmacists' professional subjectivities in terms of their value within neoliberalism. Under this enabling technology, pharmacists' scope of practice is expanded by the state away from merely dispensing towards non-traditional (and subjectivity-constructing) practices such as immunization and prescribing. The extension of billable services to include medication reviews makes visible the value of the pharmacist to the state beyond a traditional role of dispensing. Thus, the formerly "devalued" pharmacist, as urged by pharmacy elites, can gain status by buying into a discursive formation legitimizing the role of the pharmacist as a full-fledged healthcare expert. This discursive formation taps into a historically devalued construction of pharmacists as mere businesspeople in earlier eras. Prior to 2008, implementing pharmaceutical or patient care in the community has been challenging, as studies have shown that pharmacists have little control over their work. Pharmacy's loss of professional autonomy was labelled proletarianization, defined in neo-Marxist sociology as the loss of control "over the context and content of [work] because of the bureaucratization and corporatization of healthcare" (Coburn et al., 1997, p. 2). Community (or retail) pharmacy has long been associated with corporate pharmacy, and the majority of pharmacists working in Canada are employed as staff pharmacists (CIHI, 2020). Because their work is determined by head office

quotas, staff pharmacists have had little input into hiring support staff to whom they might delegate technical work (Rosenthal et al., 2016).

Neoliberal drug system reform has arguably "forced" pharmacists, who struggled to label themselves a "profession" and not a "trade" historically, to identify with new business models which recognize their important responsibility for healthcare and business sustainability through professional intervention. Our archival discourse promises a utopic future *if* pharmacists take on the subject position of the active and responsible pharmacist performing the state agenda. In our archival texts, elites governed pharmacists by appealing to their individual responsibility to "save" the profession because switching subjectivities was not only good for the profession, but also for patients and the healthcare system. Those who resist risk a dystopic future for the profession.

Using a Foucauldian theoretical perspective opens up new areas of research highlighting state/elite professional relations in (re)establishing professional legitimacy in an era of neoliberalism. In the case of pharmacy, future studies could investigate how "resilient" pharmacists have realized the profession's construction of a "utopic" future. For professions across the board, we might ask, where does the push for resiliency as a technology of self-governance lead? Arguably, health professions in Canada are facing professional burnout by which resilient subjects in an ever-demanding marketplace require lifelong adoption and adaptation of new discourses and practices (Walkerdine, 2006).

Our research addresses an under-researched aspect of professional governmentality since little is known about how professions other than medicine are governed by their advocacy groups to become responsibilized subjects who will take on a state/professional agenda (Annandale, 1989; Coburn et al., 1997, Sheaff et al., 2004). Our findings are thus relevant to a range of professions which are yet to be explored using a Foucauldian lens.

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# Working the Boundaries of Social Work: Artificial Intelligence and the Profession of Social Work

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## Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic decision-support are relatively new technologies within the field of social work. This paper investigates how the social work profession in Denmark responds to the current technological changes. Analysing articles from professional journals associated with the Danish Association of Social Workers, online content on the association's website, and interviews with key actors involved in the association's work on technology, this paper shows how professional agents legitimize and criticise these technologies, thereby performing different kinds of boundary work. The paper will show how such boundary work, carried out by the profession of social work in Denmark, change over time, and how, in the discussion on artificial intelligence, the profession reinforces its own position within the welfare state, demarcates the boundaries between the profession of social work and other occupational groups, and formulates a new professional project.

## Keywords

Social work, artificial intelligence, boundary work, professional jurisdiction, welfare professionals

# Introduction: New technologies, changing professional jurisdictions

Artificial intelligence and algorithms are rapidly becoming new technologies in public administration and within the field of social work (see for instance, Eubanks, 2018; Gillingham, 2019; Ting et al., 2018). Artificial intelligence is used to analyse large amounts of data for the purpose of finding connections and patterns. In social work, artificial intelligence is for instance used in municipal case management of the unemployed to determine the risks of long-term unemployment (Seidelin et al., 2022) by analysing different historical data and variables. In child welfare and protection services, municipalities also test and implement artificial intelligence to determine risks and prioritize resources (Schwartz et al., 2004). The political incentive for implementing these technologies is that they are said to enhance the consistency, transparency, accuracy, and effectiveness in social work (Coulthard et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2004). Other actors, however, criticize the technologies for standardizing social work, for stigmatizing and discriminating against certain groups of citizens, and for not being able to replace professional discretion and judgement (Eubanks, 2018). In Denmark, several projects with artificial intelligence within social work have sparked a debate in the media about profiling, stigmatization, and discrimination (Kristensen, 2022).

New technologies present themselves as options for professions to develop new work tasks; they are opportunities for professions to claim new areas of expertise (Abbott, 1988; Timmermans, 2002). However, technologies also have the potential to destroy existing professional work tasks (Abbott, 1988; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). Thus, a new technology, such as artificial intelligence, has the potential to change the work tasks of social workers radically. In the process of adapting to new technological changes, professions use *boundary work* to defend their work areas. In the sociology of professions, the concept of boundary work, originally coined by Gieryn (1983), has been used to analyse how professions demarcate their own areas of authority and control from that of other professions (e.g., Allen 2000; Halpern, 1992; Timmermans, 2002), and other groups, such as clients and state agencies (e.g., Fournier, 2000; Liu, 2008). Some of these studies (Liu, 2008; Timmermans, 2002) build specifically on Andrew Abbotts work (1988) that posits that in claiming areas of expertise, authority, and control, professions are always competing, coordinating, and negotiating with adjacent professions, striving to legitimize their own role, and that changes in work tasks lead to changes in professional jurisdictions and in the professions themselves (Abbott, 1988). It follows that such a *system of professions* will always be in process (Bucher & Strauss, 1961).

In this paper, I try to answer the question: How does the profession of social work in Denmark respond to artificial intelligence? This paper shows how new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, predictive algorithms, and algorithmic decision-support, challenge the profession of social work and its core work tasks, but the paper also shows how social workers use the new field of artificial intelligence to reinforce the concepts of professionalism and expertise within the field of social work. As a so-called “welfare profession” (Brante 1990), social

work has less authority and control over its own work tasks than "traditional" professions such as medicine and law. Therefore, social work faces challenges in building professional "projects" (Harrits & Larsen, 2016; Larson, 2013) and claiming professional jurisdiction. The analysis explores the boundary work of a welfare profession and shows how this professional boundary work changes over time. In this paper, I show how the profession of social work performs boundary work relating to other professions and different work tasks, and the development in how the profession of social work justifies its work and authority in relation to artificial intelligence: from focusing on how artificial intelligence can remove certain administrative and bureaucratic tasks, to beginning to formulate a new professional project, in which social workers are involved in the development of artificial intelligence systems.

Artificial intelligence is a broad term that covers many different technological systems. These technologies do very different things in professional practice. One distinction is between fully automated decision-making systems, on the one hand, and systems that provide additional and optional information, on the other. Danish municipalities have implemented AI in social work in very limited areas, contributing to uncontroversial work tasks, such as the collection of specific information from different systems. However, as the analysis will show, there are projects that work with artificial intelligence in more complex areas, such as using AI in decision-making processes related to child protection services. In this paper, I analyse how the profession of social work engages with the concept of artificial intelligence. These discussions are often unclear as to the specificities of the systems but relate more to the broad concept of AI. However, my analysis shows how the professions themselves become more aware of the differences and nuances in the ways in which artificial intelligence can be used.

The rest of the paper will proceed as follows: Drawing on the sociology of professions, I will first describe the professional jurisdiction of social work and professional boundary work. The theoretical framework is based on an interactionist, processual sociology of professions, such as Abbott (1988), Bucher and Strauss (1961), and Liu (2018). I will then continue to describe the design, data, and methods of the study. Next, I will analyse my material in three analytical sections and, finally, I will present my conclusion on how, as a profession, social work is striving to uphold its own boundaries, when confronted with a new technology such as artificial intelligence.

# Theory: The jurisdiction of social work and (welfare) professional boundary work

Many studies emphasize how technology will change professional work and the role of professions (Abbott, 1988; Timmermans, 2002). In a recent contribution, Daniel Susskind and Richard Susskind (2015) argue that technology will fundamentally change—and is already changing—the role of professions to the point where the profession as an institution will disappear, because expertise will be accessible to consumers and citizens to a new degree. For instance, new technologies increase the *routinization of professional work* (making it easier

to standardize and automate professional work tasks) and introduce *new competition* from technical actors and organizations.

A growing body of literature has analysed the influence of algorithmic systems on frontline work and decision-making in public organizations (see for instance, Brown et al., 2019; Coulthard et al., 2020; Gillingham, 2019; Peeters, 2020; Petersen et al., 2021). Within the area of social work and politics, studies such as Virginia Eubanks (2018) and Cathy O'Neil (2016) show how predictive algorithms and automated decision-making are biased and systematically profile people, who already lack resources and are in contact with the welfare system. As other studies have also shown (Høybye-Mortensen, 2015), decision-making systems are not neutral technologies but impact professional behaviour and human decision-making. With these insights in mind, Peeters (2020) suggests analyses that focus on the human-algorithm interaction and, among other things, recommends, that professionals should be trained in supervising the algorithms they work with.

In this study, I analyse social work as a so-called welfare profession (Brante, 1990). Welfare professions are closely linked with the welfare state. Compared with the more classic professions, such as medicine and law, they do not have the same amount of authority, power, and control over work tasks and education (Toren, 1972, p. 14). In their work, welfare professions are continually in direct contact with citizens, clients, students, and patients (Kamp, 2016). It is characteristic of welfare professions that municipalities, regions, or the state employ most of the professionals. The various welfare professions differ as to how heavily public policies regulate their work. In Denmark, social work is heavily regulated, especially with respect to areas such as municipal employment. This, and other characteristics, have led Danish researchers to claim that the jurisdiction of social work in Denmark is not very consolidated (Dalgaard, 2014). Here, two characteristics are defining and relevant in relation to the professional position and status of social work.

*First*, social work is a profession with considerable administrative responsibility and administrative work tasks, but social workers do not define themselves as administrators. Abbott claims that social work has always fought to define its boundaries in relation to administrative work (Abbott, 1995). As early as 1972, Toren described how social workers in the US tried to get rid of their administrative tasks to free up more time for rehabilitative casework (1972). The professional and academic discussion within social work concerning various New Public Management tools has, among other things, centred on new demands for registration and documentation (Mik-Meyer, 2018; Parton, 2008). The Danish Association of Social Workers (Dansk Socialrådgiverforening [hereafter DS], 2010) has demonstrated how much time social workers spend on activities such as documentation, and how little they spend on direct contact with citizens. Professions in general, and welfare professions in particular, are dealing with similar issues concerning administrative and bureaucratic tasks. However, the discussion is especially pronounced in social work.

*Secondly*, there is a notable and lively discussion in social work about the trend towards standardization and the possibilities of maintaining and sustaining the role of professional discretion (e.g., Brodkin, 2011; Evans, 2011; Evans & Harris, 2004; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). The literature defines professional discretion as the ability to apply knowledge-based principles in concrete cases by drawing on expertise and experience (Molander et al., 2012). The literature on professions has also debated issues concerning standardization and the room for professional discretion (e.g., Timmermans, 2002). According to Abbott (1988), professional work can neither be too standardized (which would mean that anyone, without a specialized education could do it), nor have too much room for professional discretion (which makes the work difficult to legitimize) (1988, p. 52). This paper finds that the profession of social work carries out considerable work in claiming this room for professional discretion, suggesting, together with other researchers (Evans & Harris, 2004), that professional discretion still exists in social work, even though it is threatened by processes of standardization.

All in all, this means that, as a profession, social work defends its own boundaries against more administrative tasks and against standardization.

In this paper, I draw on the concept of a "professional project", developed by Larson (2013) and deployed in numerous studies of professional power and privilege (e.g., Harrits & Larsen, 2016; Suddaby & Viale, 2011). Professional projects are collective projects that attempt to establish market closure and, thus, social status for the profession (Larson, 2013). In this paper, I use this term to show how the profession of social work defines a new area of expertise as part of its professional project.

Originally, Gieryn (1983) used the concept of boundary work to describe the practical and symbolic activities of scientists distinguishing between "science" and "non-science". In the sociology of professions, many researchers have used the term to analyse professional demarcations (e.g., Allen 2000; Fournier, 2000; Halpern, 1992; Timmermans, 2002) and to distinguish professional from non-professional. Some researchers have developed this idea into different typologies of professional boundary work (e.g., Liu, 2015). One of the main ideas behind such typologies is that boundary work takes place pragmatically in everyday floor-level work (Timmermans, 2002) and, also, with more strategic, organizational ideas in mind. In the sociology of professions, especially studies that draw on Abbott's ideas (1988), professional development is always related to other professions. In the process of claiming areas of expertise, authority, and control, professions compete and coordinate with other adjacent professions. When a profession such as social work tackles new technological developments, this will always in some way involve a connection with other professions. One way of understanding such a relationship is through the concept of boundary work. In this paper, I analyse one type of boundary work, namely the work that goes on in a professional association, when a new technology has the potential to alter the professions' work tasks and areas of expertise. In everyday professional practice, there are other types of boundary work, which may look different—and probably are. In this paper, however, I analyse how the profession of social

work itself, tries to make sense of and tackle these new technologies. In this process, the profession (re)defines its own place in a system of professions by claiming and demarcating social work's authority in relation to other occupational groups.

# Design, data, method

I analyse articles from three professional journals associated with DS, the Danish Association of Social Workers, and online content from the association's website. These journals are mostly read by members of the association, and I therefore analyse how, internally, the profession itself makes sense of these new technologies. I collected the documents online in July 2022. I searched DS' website and the three journals using the search words "AI", "algorithms", "artificial intelligence", "automatization", "machine learning", "predictive models", "decision-support", and "robot". Having eliminated irrelevant articles (for instance when "robot" was used in a metaphorical way), my material consisted of 63 documents. These documents are different documents related to the organization, such as minutes from board meetings, news items from the website, and information from the biannual professional conference *Socialrådgiverdage* (Social Worker Days), together with articles from professional journals. These journals are *Socialrådgiveren*, (The Social Worker), which is a journal for members of DS, *Offentlig ledelse* (Public Management), which is for management members of DS, and *Uden for Nummer* (an expression that means to be strange, remarkable, or different)—a journal on research and practice within social work, contributing academic articles, some peer-reviewed, for all DS members. Table 1 summarizes my material.

**Table 1.** Analysed documents.

| | |
|---|---|
| Organizational documents. Mainly minutes from board meetings, regional group meetings and annual directors' reports | 13 documents (from 2016 to 2020) |
| Website. News items and strategic documents | 4 documents (from 2017 to 2019) |
| Information from Social Worker Days | 8 documents (from 2017 to 2021) |
| The Social Worker (journal) | 28 documents (from 2011 to 2022) |
| Public Management (journal) | 7 documents (from 2017 to 2019) |
| Uden for Nummer (journal) | 4 documents (from 2019 to 2021) |

I have coded all documents, first in specific codes closely related to the material and key words used in the documents (codes such as automatization, newly graduated social workers, information, efficiency, data, quality, core tasks). Next, I looked at the codes over the course

of time (from 2016 to 2022), looking for differences as to how often specific words and ways of justification and criticism were mentioned. This way, I realized a development in how the profession justifies its core work tasks over time as well as the performance of boundary work in relation to artificial intelligence. In my analytical process, I moved between my empirical material and my theoretical framework in an abductive process (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). My analysis began as an analysis of the social work profession, using analytical concepts from the sociology of professions. The choice to use boundary work as an analytical tool for the purpose of understanding my material developed as I studied my empirical material more closely. The concept of "professional project" (Larson, 2013) also became important, especially as I analysed the most recent material. Thus, the idea of understanding parts of the material as a professional project resulted from the abductive process of going back and forth between theory and data. In my analytical process, I have also drawn on my earlier work within the area (Meilvang & Dahler, 2022), and I therefore use parts of previous interview material with professionals and DS representatives, whom I interviewed as part of a project on artificial intelligence in social work within Danish child protection services.

In the following analysis, I explore the boundary work carried out by social workers and the professional organization of social workers in Denmark relative to artificial intelligence. I demonstrate how social workers describe and discuss these new technologies and use such discussions to demarcate the boundaries of their profession in relation to other professions, managers, and politicians and reinforce what they themselves consider to be the core work tasks of social work. I demonstrate that, over time, there has been a development in these professional discussions and in the way boundaries are upheld and maintained.

# Analysis: Different work tasks, new boundaries

In the following, I analyse content from 2016 to 2022. During this period, Socialrådgiveren published three special issues on artificial intelligence and robots: One in 2017, one in 2019, and one in 2022. Much of my analysed material comes from these three issues. In 2019, DS released a technology strategy on which they had been working since 2017. From 2019 and up until today, there have been several smaller, but highly profiled, Danish projects that have developed artificial intelligence technologies targeted at social work. These projects have been discussed in the Danish media and relate to social work with child protection services as well as the area of (un)employment in Denmark. Even though these two areas of social work are quite different in Denmark, what I am concerned with here is the way in which the profession *as a whole* discusses the new technologies. In the following section, I structure my analysis around three themes: the first relates mainly to the period between 2016 and 2017, the other two discuss the period after 2017 and up until today.

The technologies discussed in the different documents are referred to as "artificial intelligence". They constitute a range of various specific technologies, such as voice recognition, predictive algorithms, algorithmic decision-support systems, and more. In the documents,

they are all categorized as a kind of "artificial intelligence", which is also why I use this term in the paper, even though some of the technologies are not artificial intelligence *per se* but use different varieties of machine learning.

In many ways, the way in which the professional association draws its boundaries relates to larger public narratives concerning artificial intelligence. In Denmark, such narratives, often utopian or dystopian extremes (The Royal Society, 2018), have centred on AI as a silver-bullet solution to an overworked, public workforce and an ageing population (utopian) or AI as surveillance and biased profiling (dystopian) (Kristensen, 2022). In the following analysis, these discussions play out in specific ways, for instance as the rather utopian idea that AI systems will be capable of coping with all bureaucracy for social workers.

## *Working the boundary to administration: "Move time away from bureaucracy to core professionalism"*

One important boundary that DS, and social workers in general, work to enforce is the boundary between social work's important tasks on the one hand and, on the other, administrative tasks, such as registration and documentation. In relation to artificial intelligence, DS invokes this distinction and delegates administrative tasks to the new technological systems. This way, artificial intelligence can help social workers, giving them more time for the work tasks they are "really" supposed to perform. This boundary performance is especially clear from the earliest mention of artificial intelligence. As such, it is a kind of "first wave" boundary work.

In 2016, the president of DS wrote:

> How will the technological development affect the working life of social workers in the future? We do not know the answer to this, but it is important that we ensure a quality agenda for a digitalized future instead of an efficiency agenda, where the goal is to reduce the number of employees. The automatization of parts of the work functions of social workers should be a tool to minimize workloads and monotonous tasks such as e.g. registration—thus leaving us with more time for core tasks (Socialrådgiveren, 2016, p. 13, author translation).

Here, DS enforces its own jurisdiction (the "core tasks" of social workers) and clearly demarcates the boundaries of this jurisdiction by leaving out "monotonous" work tasks such as registration. The important dichotomy here is between quality and efficiency. According to an article on artificial intelligence, published in a 2017 issue of Socialrådgiveren:

> The Danish Association of Social Workers recently decided to develop a technology strategy and will work towards leaving its mark on this development, focusing on quality rather than efficiency. In short: moving working hours from bureaucracy to core professionalism (in Danish, "kernefaglighed") (Socialrådgiveren, 2017a, p. 17, author translation).

Neither these quotes nor other articles clarify how this "core professionalism" should be construed. Looking through the articles, one important core work task for which artificial intelligence can free up additional time, is the work with citizens—in Danish "borgernært arbejde", which, directly translated, means "citizen-close work". A member of the technology group that was developing a technology strategy for DS (a then social worker who, today, is vice president of DS) wrote:

> Am looking forward to the day when robots have come so far that they can do the bureaucratic stuff—and social workers can spend their time on citizens (Socialrådgiveren, 2017b, p. 26, author translation).

Elsewhere in the material, the core tasks are described as "professional" and "knowledge based", but in 2017 the focus was particularly on time spent with citizens and quality in case management. One important example of artificial intelligence, mentioned in the 2017-issue of Socialrådgiveren, is voice recognition to be used for the keeping of case records. Such artificial intelligence is precisely a type of technology that could help with documentation and registration, freeing up time for other work tasks.

Later, in 2021, DS still adheres to this view. In an interview, the vice president of DS (the same as quoted above) said:

> I actually believe that the municipalities are mainly successful with respect to the simpler stuff. Thus, certain services can, for instance, be carried out by a robot that will handle everything. It's worse for a trade union with members who are mainly administrative officers, such as e.g. HK. From a social worker's perspective, however, you are not particularly keen on carrying out such work and, therefore, we actually think it's great (author translation).

Here, the vice president of DS delegates the administrative work that social workers are not really interested in carrying out, to other occupations and other unions, primarily HK (HK is a Danish trade union for trade and administrative work, the members of which often have educations that are shorter than bachelor level). This union covers many administrative officers in municipalities. Artificial intelligence and robots are considered a threat to *them*, the DS vice president claims, not to social workers. This is clearly a type of boundary work that makes a distinction between administrative occupations and social work. As such, it reinforces a general discussion on and about social work (and other welfare professions), namely that social work must define itself in opposition to administrative work and defend its work practices against an overweight of administrative tasks. Other occupational groups can also perform a variety of administrative tasks, which might then dilute social work as a profession and threaten its jurisdiction.

This boundary work is especially apparent in the 2016 and 2017 vocabulary where terms such as "bureaucracy" and "efficiency" appear quite frequently in relation to artificial intelligence.

What can be seen from this early, or "first wave", of boundary work is that administration, documentation, and registration are all tasks associated with "bureaucracy" and not essential work tasks to the profession of social work—also, social workers feel that such tasks take up too much of their working hours. Here, DS and social workers in general advocate that artificial intelligence should be developed and implemented in a way that will support the distribution of roles and defend the social workers' own core tasks and jurisdiction, which comprise of people-centred work.

## *Defending professional discretion: Inexperienced social workers and the threat of standardization*

From 2019 and onwards, the boundary work changes focus. In this "second wave" of boundary work, social work is defending its jurisdiction against artificial intelligence. Specifically, artificial intelligence is considered to be threatening professional discretion and, as such, the profession itself. In the course of the years from 2017, when social work as a profession viewed artificial intelligence as a potential help in the prioritization of "core work", municipalities, researchers, and foundations in Denmark initiated various projects implementing artificial intelligence in social work. In 2017, a large foundation began a research project on "decision-support for referrals" in the work with vulnerable children and families, where researchers developed and tested artificial intelligence for the categorization of referrals. In 2017, a Danish municipality wished to develop artificial intelligence for early detection of vulnerable children. In 2018, this idea sparked a heated debate in the Danish media across the country about surveillance and profiling (Kristensen, 2022). One research project, commenced in late 2017, aims to develop artificial intelligence for casework at job centres.

Even though these projects were subject to some criticism, different state authorities as well as the national association of local authorities in Denmark (Local Government Denmark) focus on digitalization and artificial intelligence. In 2018, DS attended a debate in the Danish parliament on what was referred to as "digitalization-ready legislation" (in Danish "digitaliseringsparat lovgivning"), the purpose of which was that all legislation should be prepared for digitalization and thus primarily based on objective criteria. In this debate, the DS president stated:

> If it is just a matter of getting sickness benefits up and running, then it will be fine to receive help from digital tools on the making of such decisions. But if abuse and child protection are involved, it will be highly problematic having computers decide (Socialrådgiveren, 2018, p. 26, author translation).

Here, the DS president repeats the distinction between administrative and social work. But, in this debate, instead of merely highlighting where artificial intelligence can be useful, she criticises the idea of artificial intelligence ("computers") in certain areas of social work, specifically with respect to decision-making in child protection cases and more generally, earlier in the debate, in relation to "complex casework in instances where citizens are involved in

more than one case" (Socialrådgiveren, 2018, p. 26). This adds another dimension to boundary work, focusing on defending social workers' core tasks against these technologies.

In this new "wave" of boundary work, the social work profession defends its room for professional discretion. This is often contrasted to the implementation of fixed standards and thus relates to a general discussion within social work on tendencies for standardization, the possibilities of sustaining professional discretion, and the general fear of being made redundant as a profession owing to the standardization of work tasks. In an interview in Socialrådgiveren, a union representative, who has worked with various artificial intelligence systems, says:

> I'm a bit worried that we are developing a standardized form of casework which you can easily buy into if you have too many cases and are too busy, or if you are a newly graduate (Socialrådgiveren, 2019a, p. 17, author translation).

Here, the union representative not only criticizes the technological systems for standardization, but she also points towards various reasons why social workers should accept such standardization, reasons that are closely related to the current employment situation for social workers in Denmark: being too busy, having too many cases, and being inexperienced. As DS has analysed and focused on in Danish media (Dansk Socialrådgiverforening, 2020), social workers are stressed and often work many cases. Another issue within social work is the municipalities' difficulties with respect to retaining employees and, thus, at any given time, many social workers will be newly employed. For these reasons, technological standardizations represent an even larger threat to social work. In an interview with an educational researcher from one of the vocational colleges for the education of social workers, the researcher also highlights this argument: "Which young and newly educated social worker would dare to go against the recommendation of an algorithm that has a tinge of objective truth?" (Socialrådgiveren, 2019c, p. 22, author translation).

DS and individual social workers point out that artificial intelligence should never replace professional discretion. A manager within a municipality, working with different technologies in social work, told Socialrådgiveren:

> As we are working with a complex and vulnerable group of citizens, digitalization can obviously neither replace professional discretion nor the individual assessment that will lead to a concrete decision. The subjective assessment, the professional analysis and the face-to-face meeting are elements that digitalization cannot and should not replace. (Socialrådgiveren, 2019b, p. 19, author translation).

One of the reasons why technological systems should neither assess nor decide without the involvement of a human being is that neither such assessment nor decision-making are exact sciences. The researcher quoted earlier explains:

> Professional discretion in social work builds on much more than variables and characteristics. Social workers' sensory impressions such as smell and facial expressions cannot be standardized into an algorithmic system as advantages and disadvantages in already defined response categories. (Socialrådgiveren, 2019c, p. 23, author translation).

In this type of boundary work, the boundaries are thus drawn around professional discretion, professional assessment, and the social worker's subjective experience in the meeting with citizens. This is not the place for artificial intelligence, as this would entail the risk of standardizing complex casework. Here, the profession does not perform boundary work relative to other professions, but relative to professionalism in general. It is a defence of professional discretion and the need for *professional* assessments and *professional* analysis, i.e., the need for professionally educated workers and against de-professionalization.

## *"Experts from practice should be in charge of the digital transformation": Decision-support as a new professional project?*

With respect to this "second wave" of boundary work, where discussions focus on professional discretion and standardization, a slightly different kind of boundary work is being performed. This revolves around the concept of "decision-support", to which many actors refer after 2017 with respect to artificial intelligence and social work. The idea behind the concept of decision-support is that artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems should not be the sole constituents in the assessment of cases; nor should they be decisive in complex cases within social work. They can, however, help to inform this decision for social workers, providing various kinds of relevant information. This idea does, to a certain extent, continue the boundary work described above by clearly demarcating professional discretion as a valuable work task to be performed by professional social workers. However, it posits that valuable information can be attained from artificial intelligence and, further, that such information will help social workers overcome some of their own blind spots in their work. A union representative involved in a project on artificial intelligence focused on referrals, says:

> The algorithm should not decide anything. I usually discuss referrals with a colleague and, here, the algorithm could be a kind of third colleague. When you work with the same kind of cases, you can become a bit blind to things. The decision-support could contribute to our discussions as to whether we are doing what we would like to do. In that way, it can be said to qualify our assessment (Socialrådgiveren, 2022a, p. 22, author translation).

This idea of artificial intelligence as decision-support is most evident in recent documents, from 2019 and up to now, and particularly evident in the 2022 thematic issue of Socialrådgiveren. In contrast to the defence of professional discretion described in the previous section, the idea of decision-support makes artificial intelligence an element in the assessment process and, hence, defines the boundaries of the profession of social work in a

different way: Though artificial intelligence can be used in the process, a professional social worker must be involved and have the last say in decision-making. Thus, the inclusion of artificial intelligence in the decision-making process within social work, will also mean that AI comes closer to the central work tasks of the profession. As such, a new professional project is beginning to take shape around social workers' involvement in the development of artificial intelligence. In 2022, two social workers working as digitalization consultants in a Danish municipality wrote in Socialrådgiveren under the heading "Experts from practice should be in charge of the digital transformation":

> Often, the provider has considerable influence on the system design. At this early stage in the process, some control is removed from the professionals who, at the end of the day, should have the last word. There is a risk of getting an inferior product, at a higher cost […]. Therefore, the legislation for digital projects should be amended to the effect that, as a point of departure, experts from practice shall, to a higher extent, have a say in their digital working day. We should look at tenders and contracts so that the public sector will have more to say. When the development of digital solutions involved in socially critical tasks demands a high degree of professionalism, it should be natural to involve professional groups and their knowledge. This is why, as a society, we must have a national digital strategy that supports professionals from practice in influencing the digital transformation of the welfare society (Socialrådgiveren, 2022b, p. 31, author translation).

What is described here is clearly a new area of expertise as an element in the professional project (Larson, 2013) for social workers, namely that of developing technologies aimed at social work. This is a claim for a new jurisdictional task, a claim for "taking control of" the area, which should be subject to legislative control. It also draws a boundary towards another occupational group, namely the developers of digital technology who are not professional social workers "from practice". Likewise, DS, itself, explicitly embraces this as a professional project. In an interview published in Socialrådgiveren in 2019, the vice president said:

> We are the ones who meet the citizens, and thus we are the ones who can tell which challenges new technologies can solve for us. Therefore, I would like social workers to be involved in the development of these new technologies, and they should be released from their duties to test a new robot, for instance (Socialrådgiveren, 2019d, p. 27, author translation).

In this type of boundary work, the profession of social work defines the development and implementation of artificial intelligence as an area of expertise within social work, thus defining a new area within their professional project.

# Discussion

Susskind and Susskind (2015) suggest that new technologies increase the *routinization of professional work* and introduce *new competition* by technical actors and organizations. My analysis supports this idea by showing how the profession of social work in Denmark tries to protect the profession from routinization and standardization and, also, from new competition as represented by IT-developers. In my analysis, I discuss three themes and three different ways of carrying out boundary work related to artificial intelligence within the profession of social work. I have described them chronologically, albeit the last two overlap to a certain extent. There is a clear development from the thematic issue of the 2017 edition of Socialrådgiveren, where the focus is on bureaucracy and efficiency, to the other two thematic issues of 2019 and 2022, respectively, where decision-support and professional discretion are in focus. With respect to artificial intelligence, the boundaries of social work are set in a different way. First, artificial intelligence is delegated to assist with documentation and registration, work tasks which social work as a profession is not interested in. This frees up time for social workers, enabling them to spend more time with citizens and, hence, heightens the quality of casework. Then, artificial intelligence moves closer towards the core work tasks of the social worker, being considered both a threat to professional discretion and a further standardization of social work and, at the same time, a valuable tool for the profession of social work, which the profession should help develop. Based on my material, and on the fact that the area is still very much in process, it is difficult to determine whether these last two types of boundary work are chronological developments or discussions internally within the profession on how to engage with artificial intelligence. Maybe the two positions represent two different groups, what Bucher and Strauss refer to as professional *segments* (Bucher & Strauss, 1961). Professional segments are groups that strive to change the profession in certain ways. These segments compete internally to develop the profession in ways that align with their respective competencies and ideas. Hence, the two positions could be two groups within social work, each working towards defining the boundaries around social work in two different ways.

There are, I believe, several reasons for this development. *First*, the change from first to second wave boundary work could be due to the development of various specific AI projects in the area of social work in Denmark. The first wave boundary work idealizes the promise of artificial intelligence and sees it as valuable to the profession. However, the development of specific projects, together with the government's drive for digitalizing the public sector, makes the profession feel threatened that professional social work will be made redundant. *Second*, the move away from denouncing artificial intelligence, owing to the fear that it will standardize social work, towards embracing it in some form and claiming it as a profession, could be due to the realization that artificial intelligence will become reality, whether the profession of social work likes it or not, and that it will be better to be involved in the process than being left out. However, it could also be that those recommending a certain professional project have seen (or can imagine) how social work will benefit and further that, as a segment

within social work, they are claiming a place for themselves within the field of social work. *Third*, two classical discussions in social work, about standardization on the one hand and administration on the other, are once again played out in relation to artificial intelligence. This means that boundary work relates to more general issues about the problem of standardization within the profession of social work (thus making social workers redundant) and the problem of excessive administration (likewise making social workers redundant). As the field is still relatively new and under constant development, there is a need for follow-up research into the different kinds of boundary work (and different professional segments), and into the way in which these will change the profession of social work in the future.

# Conclusion

In my analysis I show that, over time, there is a development in the boundary work related to the profession of social work with respect to new technologies and the use of artificial intelligence. During the first period, from 2016 to 2017, the profession drew its boundaries to delineate the profession from administrative work tasks. Here, artificial intelligence is welcomed as something that can help with administrative work tasks and free up time for complex problem-solving and the "core task of social work". In the period between 2019 and 2022, artificial intelligence is debated in relation to issues of standardization and professional judgement. In the DS technology strategy of 2019 and in the 2022 special issue of Socialrådgiveren, a new professional project is formulated, arguing that social workers shall have a central role in the development of technologies using artificial intelligence.

This paper shows that boundary work in a welfare profession such as social work is constantly in process and changes relatively fast, as new technologies are developed and implemented. This shows that the profession of social work experiences the need to defend its boundaries against such new technologies but, at the same time, deploys strategies of seizing the technologies as new areas of expertise. The welfare professions share characteristics as compared with more traditional professions and, hence, it would be interesting to make a comparative study of other welfare professions to discover how for instance primary school teachers and nurses respond to similar technological changes going on in and around their respective areas of expertise.

As the literature shows (Høybye-Mortensen, 2015; Peeters, 2020), algorithmic systems are not neutral technologies but extend beyond their calculation or screen-output. How social work as a profession decides to deal with these systems will influence social workers' work method, their interaction with the systems and, ultimately, their own decision-making processes. As this paper has shown, there is an ongoing development within the field of social work to engage positively and actively in the development and implementation of these systems. This paper thus points out the need for more studies on this new development, the human-algorithm interaction, and the work carried out by welfare professionals in their engagement with algorithmic systems.

## Article history

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# Narratives of Teachers and Teacher Unions in Swedish Facebook Rebellion Groups

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## Abstract

This study examines narratives about the teaching profession and teacher unions that Swedish teachers jointly produce in two teachers' rebellion groups on Facebook, which is followed by a total of around 20,000 teachers. A sample of 33 posts and 2,445 comments were analysed using a narrative approach. The findings highlight narratives in which teachers wish to return to "the good old days", struggle with everyday frustrations, call for a strike as an immediate solution, and describe hypothetical futures presenting the opportunity for proactive action and call teacher unions to dialogue rather than wait for them to satisfy the teachers' demands.

## Keywords

Teacher unions, teachers, Facebook rebellion groups, narratives, hypothetical futures

# Introduction

The focus of this study is on the teaching profession and on how teachers themselves relate to Swedish teacher unions (TUs) as part of shaping the teaching profession. To approach the teaching profession, this study investigates narratives about the teaching profession and Swedish TUs jointly produced by Swedish teachers in two teachers' rebellion groups on Facebook. Teacher unions were one of several topics discussed in these groups in the spring of 2021. We became curious about how teachers presented TUs and how they related to the actions—or lack thereof—attributed to TUs.

Since the late nineteenth century, Swedish teachers have been members of various TUs. Until recently, approximately 120,000 Swedish primary and secondary school teachers, accounting for approximately 85% of all teachers, were members of two large TUs (Mörck, 2021). On 1 January 2023, these TUs merged into a single union. Unlike their English and American counterparts, which traditionally take a more activist position, Swedish TUs, with less activist strategies, have moved in the opposite direction, establishing tight relations with policymakers. This has made Swedish TUs "a part of the same establishment they are to negotiate with" (Lilja, 2014, p. 118). The development of TUs is also part of a more general transformation of the Swedish welfare state from the late 20th century characterised by initiatives for decentralisation, municipalisation and marketisation of the national school system. The TUs efforts to mobilise and professionalise the teachers thus became dependent on the good will of the state and the economic situation in the country (Ringarp, 2011). As elaborated later in this article, one might say that Swedish TUs are influential in gathering members but not so powerful in presenting the teachers' case.

Ongoing research shows that teachers are burdened by a heavy workload, which has been increased and changed by assignments such as documenting, reporting, and even advertising (Lundström, 2015; Samuelsson et al., 2018). Teachers' working conditions, working environments, and autonomy are considered important, and in this era of rapid policymaking, recent education reforms in Sweden have "reconstituted teachers' work and professionalism" (Hardy et al., 2019, p. 362) and have made teachers feel constrained and controlled by a range of demands.

The empirical data for this study came from discussions in two Swedish rebellion groups on Facebook. Their members are mainly Swedish teachers who discuss issues related to teachers' work and working conditions in primary and secondary schools. We view the phenomenon of rebellion groups in the broader context of teachers' changing conditions and their strife to improve them through such new collective formations. The rebellion aspect refers to activism for issues concerning teachers' work and working conditions, mainly through joint online discussions, narrating, and seminars. In this study, adopting a narrative approach (Georgakopoulou, 2013; Linde, 2009), we specifically explored narratives about TUs that teachers jointly produce in Facebook rebellion groups. What could these narratives tell us

about Swedish teachers and their working conditions? Further, based on previous knowledge (see Löfdahl Hultman et al., 2022) of rebellion groups' dissatisfaction with TUs, we searched for "bets" (Boje, 2011)—suggestions about possible new or different narratives about TUs and their relation to the teaching profession. Such narratives can help distinguish stories about teachers' past and present working conditions and their experiences of TUs' role and support, as well as stories containing bets on hypothetical futures that can influence TUs and their future role. The guiding research questions were as follows:

> What past and present experiences of TUs' role and support emerge from discussions in teachers' Facebook rebellion groups?
>
> What is the significance of these narratives for the Swedish teaching profession?

# TUs and the teaching profession

TUs seem to have an ambivalent position. They play an important role in the professionalisation of the teaching profession, but teachers' trust in them is questioned due to their position as policy actors. Issues highlighted in research focusing on teachers' reasons for becoming union members include changes in working conditions, higher salary levels, teachers' ideological views, and—not least—unions' moral legitimacy in terms of what kind of professional support they provide (Fidan & Erkocak, 2015; Popiel, 2013). Several researchers have pointed to a need to shift unions' moral centre of gravity to better understand and address the issues that are most important to their members (Bascia, 2008; Popiel, 2013). Bascia (2008) found few TUs in the United States that could "honestly claim broad, sustained, and positive relationships with their members" (p. 95) and argued that teachers' perceptions of their unions were obscured by a lack of organisational visibility, issues that were too narrow, and a sense that unions served the needs of only a select group of teachers.

In Nordic countries, TUs seem to take on increasingly proactive roles in policy development and professional quality. For example, the idea of a partnership between employers and employees is a strategy aimed at strengthening and renewing TUs. However, studying policy documents from The Union of Education Norway, Bie-Drivdal (2018) found the dual role of local representatives as both watchdogs and agents of change to be problematic. While documents called for proactive voices and local representatives were expected to cooperate with employers, problem-solving and quality assurance work seemed to be more important.

In Sweden, TUs have played important roles as collective agents striving for better conditions, such as higher salaries, control over working hours, and participation in decision-making (Ringarp, 2011). However, unions have been closely dependent on political initiatives concerning aspects such as the principalship of schools, the organisation of working hours, shifting national curriculums, and reforms to strengthen the impact of detailed governance by the state. In short, the professionalism developed through the relationship between Swedish teachers, their unions, and the state can be described as "professionalism from above" (Evetts, 2003),

closely linked to and dependent on mechanisms of governance and control. Swedish TUs and teachers' status as professionals are also a matter of politics. The failure or success of initiatives for professionalisation is not just a matter of mobilisation within TUs, but just as much a matter of the relation to the welfare state. Although Swedish TUs have historically striven to enhance teachers' professionalism (Ringarp, 2011), several studies have shown that their alliances with employers counteract what the teachers themselves consider important aspects of their professionalism. Lilja (2013) found that TUs failed to support the teachers, and instead of challenging politicians about teachers' working conditions, they chose to collaborate with them. Studying Swedish TUs' magazine editorials, Krantz and Fritzén (2022) found that Swedish TUs adapted and defended their positions with respect to the prevalent political, economic, and ideological conditions, leading to several contradictions and inconsistencies. Accordingly, the authors argued that unions should assume a more proactive role and that a "union's argumentation should be based on the professional conditions that its members work under" (Krantz & Fritzén, 2022, p. 268). In line with this argument, we aimed to explore the potential of discussions about TUs in Facebook rebellion groups to serve as initiatives for "professionalism from below" (Vaidyanathan, 2012). According to Vaidyanathan, such professionalism has a different meaning from that of professionalism from above in the sense that it weakens the teachers' sense of control or accountability and allows more intrinsic rights and values to be expressed by employees—in this case, teachers.

In Sweden, as in other Nordic countries, "collective agreements have a much more prominent position than legislation and other state regulations" (Kjellberg, 2022, p. 3). We believe that this has strongly influenced the Swedish teaching profession's confidence in unions' ability to contribute to improving working conditions. Simultaneously, it is reasonable to assume that teachers blame their unions when working conditions deteriorate and that they will find new arenas where the fight for improved working conditions can be carried out from within. The way in which teachers organise themselves in Facebook rebellion groups is similar to a "proactive bottom-up model of collective organization", as opposed to the top-down servicing model of union officials who rely on legislative procedures (de Turberville, 2004, p. 777). Thus, narratives about TUs shaped in Facebook groups may carry nuances and a potential bet on ways for teachers and TUs to shape a more independent form of professionalism.

# Data and methodology

Over 15 weeks in the spring of 2021, we followed two Swedish Facebook groups: Teachers' Rebellion (TR) (*Lärarupproret*, n.d.) and School Rebellion (SR) (*Skolupproret*, n.d.). The groups mainly aim to discuss issues related to teachers' work and improve working conditions in schools. Even if not all teachers post, there is a large number of teachers who follow the groups and who are possibly affected. TR was established in 2018 and has more than 15,000 members, while SR was established in the spring of 2021, steadily amassing 4,000 members during the data collection period. We followed TR for seven weeks and SR for 10 weeks, with a two-week overlap. During the data collection period, TR and SR had, on average, 350 and

650 posts per month, respectively. TR is a closed group for members only, although its broad membership makes it a more or less public network. SR was formed by TR members as a public group in pursuit of more activism and a wider audience (Löfdahl Hultman et al., 2022). At any rate, the two groups largely overlap in terms of both members and aims, and their discussions—and thus the data collected from both—are similar.

We were inspired by "netnography" (Kozinets, 2019) and the clarifying steps through which mere information is transformed into data. Unlike traditional ethnography, netnography covers a vast amount of data that researchers do not collect themselves, which means that the procedural operations must be clearly stated. Our choice of focus reflected what we, as researchers, were interested in and what we were looking for in the fluidity of posts and comments in the two Facebook groups. We employed a mix of investigative and immersive procedural operations. Our study was investigative in that we selected our data from a vast body of informational traces created in the communication between members of the two Facebook groups. Thus, we did not produce our own data from our research questions. but selected data to be included in our research. Our study was also immersive in that it was based on a set of choices that we considered to be rich, deep, and extensively descriptive and informative. A further choice is that we have included poorly described posts in a way that might represent silence in our data. In our immersive operations, we strove to preserve the context of the data—for example, the decisions made by Swedish TUs during that period or other events in society that may have had an impact. We added the number of comments or reflections on the lack of comments on a post, and we took notes on the numbers and symbols of likes (angry, love, thumbs up, thumbs down, etc.). We recorded our reflections on the kinds of content and arguments that we found and our initial ideas of the narratives emerging from the data in what Kozinets terms a "netnographer's immersion journal" (2019 p. 194), which is similar to a traditional ethnographer's field notes. In a similar way, our reflections based on the immersion journal are not presented in the results but constitutes part of our knowledge of the field.

This study was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of Karlstad University, Sweden (Dnr: 2020/917). No sensitive personal data were collected. Personal data were handled in accordance with the legal basis of general interest (Article 14, 5b GDPR). To conceal any identifying features, such as names, schools, and exact dates of posts, we chose not to specify which of the two groups the quotes are from. We repeatedly informed the members of the Facebook groups about our research and their right to opt not to participate via administrators and direct posts. One person chose not to participate. No information or comments related to that person were downloaded, saved or used in the analysis.

Our sample consisted of 33 posts with a total of 2,455 comments regarding TUs in some way. Each post had from 0 to 324 comments as well as likes (thumbs up) and various emojis. Likes commonly ranged from 50 to 100, although there were also posts with more than 200. The

use of emojis was less frequent—for example, one post received 15 angry emojis and 15 crying emojis. Comments on posts, in turn, received new comments and likes. Some posts were closed to further comments and likes, as the administrators deemed the discussions unethical or hateful. The sample contained posts with discussions and/or mere comments that could allow us to interpret how members related to TUs and what they wanted TUs to achieve in terms of working conditions.

One of the researchers read the thousands of posts and comments saved for analysis. Almost every day over the data collection period, approximately two hours were spent scrutinising the posts and comments. Some posts may have been lost during the operation process. However, the researcher read almost all the posts and scrolled through the comments. After 15 weeks, we reached what is often described in traditional ethnography as ethnographic saturation. New posts appeared to concern the same overarching issues, although they were authored by different persons and were sometimes related to different contextual aspects. Comments appeared in threads several days after the posts were made. For this reason, we downloaded and saved data after some days, when no or few new comments appeared. Posts that we did not save may have concerned important teacher-related issues (e.g. mobile phones in classrooms, teacher education, and students' achievements) but were not related to TUs. We reflected on the extent to which our small sample drawn from a large number of posts could be described as "cherry-picking"—that is, selecting data that can yield certain desired results. Our curiosity about what narratives were retold or were new and what bets on a hypothetical future we might observe led us to rule out this possibility.

The netnographic approach focuses not only on the contextual aspects of social media but also on societal issues that may affect what is discussed. The data collection in this study took place some months before and after a new three-year agreement between employers and the two main Swedish TUs. During these weeks, a report was released (Mörck, 2021) detailing the possibility of a merger into a single union for all teachers. This period also coincided with a third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden, during which the spread of infection in schools increased. Although the role of TUs in general was a main topic for discussion in the Facebook groups during this period, these societal issues were also frequently discussed.

By following the two Facebook groups, we gained an understanding of the complexity of teachers' relationships with TUs. There were calls for more or different support and new ways for TUs to represent the teachers. This contextual knowledge of teachers' relationships with TUs guided us in searching for narratives about the difficulties, challenges, and opportunities for teachers and the Swedish school.

# Analytical frames and methods for analysing the data

Our analytical framework was based on research on professionalism and digital and social media, and a narrative approach was used for analysing the data. To interpret our results in terms of teacher professionalism, we relied on Evetts' (2010) notion that professionalism is

not static but in a state of constant change as the conditions of a profession change. In line with Evetts (2010) and Löfgren and Wieslander (2020), we contend that both occupational and organisational forms of professionalism, emphasising agendas of internal collegial control and external accountability respectively, are involved in shaping teachers' professional identities. Professionalism in relation to Swedish TUs is a matter of teachers' trust in unions' ability to identify conditions that need to be improved. The trade union movement at the national level can best be associated with an organisational form of professionalism, although renewal and democratisation efforts are also made at both the national and international levels. Also, models of collective bargaining occur at both the central and local levels (Kjellberg, 2019), and renewal strategies are made for developing an organising culture in teacher unionism, such as empowering teachers at the grassroots level (Gavin, 2022), thereby raising teachers' voices and exerting influence. Despite initiatives at the central TU level, a collegial form of professionalism that takes teachers' voices into account is lacking. Stevenson and Gilliland (2015) argued for a new kind of democratic professionalism that acknowledges teachers' skills and the complexity of teaching and gives TUs as democratic organisations a central role in representing teachers' voices.

We view the two Facebook groups as networked publics (Boyd, 2010) and the stories taking shape in them as networked narratives (Wang et al., 2017) in the sense that they are surrounded by technical resources, likes, and shared posts. According to Khazraee and Novak (2018), being part of a social media group contributes to shaping identities and communities that influence what is discussed by the members. The working conditions discussed by the teachers may be both conditional and limited by the fact that a new post can quickly make an earlier post less visible (Boyd, 2010). To some extent, to gain an understanding of positioning among teachers, we searched for protagonists to identify the alliances created within and outside the Facebook groups, as well as their conceptual antagonists (Khazraee & Novak, 2018), to determine the groupings or organisations outside (or within) the groups that teachers targeted.

In order to analyse the data, we used analytical concepts drawn from a narrative research tradition. In line with narrative research on social media (Georgakopoulou, 2013; Georgalou, 2017; Page, 2010), we also regard the two Facebook groups as arenas where small stories are shaped and negotiated through discussions about TUs. Typically, small stories on Facebook are open-ended and ongoing, as users contribute various posts asynchronously. They are short and "do not necessarily fulfil prototypical criteria of narrative inquiry such as beginning-middle-end, a complicating event, and a clear evaluation of events" (Georgalou, 2017, p. 86). The ongoing storytelling in a multidimensional network of Facebook friends makes time and temporality multilayered, involving a sense of nowness, cyclical time, and hypothetical futures (Georgalou, 2017). Particular moments are given meaning through references to a common past, and cyclical repetitions open up for immediate as well as hypothetical futures. To mark what we saw as exclusive hypothetical futures in the data, we adopted Boje's (2011)

concept of *antenarrative*. According to Boje, "ante" refers to a bet and a before; therefore, an antenarrative is a "bet on the future" (p. 1). To comprehend an antenarrative in relation to other narratives, one must understand it as a description of a narrative that might become, but does not yet possess linearity, coherence, or stability. This understanding enabled us to investigate the open-ended small stories as bets or suggestions for new stories about the relationships between TUs and the teachers.

We supplemented our small story analysis with the framework of institutional narratives (Linde, 2009). This allowed us to investigate how the teachers positioned themselves through stories about TUs and about school as an institution in change. According to Linde (2009), institutional narratives consist of a canon of stories about an institution. Some of these stories have an everyday character, while others—the retold ones—are well known to most teachers because they are frequently and repeatedly told memories from the past that represent what Linde calls the core memory of an institution. Retold stories become influential, as the teachers who tell them position themselves through a certain kind of argumentation in relation to the Swedish school.

In our analysis, we searched for small stories, institutional narratives, and especially retold stories related to TUs. We explored the content that different individuals told in various ways and how it was related to different past and present aspects. However, the main aim of the analysis was to examine whether there were any bets pointing to a new or different narrative about the teaching profession and its relation to TUs in the massive body of stories shaped in the Facebook rebellion groups.

# Results: Narratives of a teaching profession on its way

The analysis revealed stories of temporal dimensions in which experiences of the past and present related to TUs and wishes and hopes about TUs told and retold by teachers contributed to forming a narrative about the Swedish school and the meaning of being a teacher. This narrative provides a picture of a teaching profession that is on its way somewhere, or at least wishes it were, but seems to be stuck in the "everyday swamp".

The overarching narrative consisted of three distinct narratives. The first narrative, *Back to the future*, was about taking advantage of and further developing the specific tasks and benefits that once formed the basis of one's choice to become a teacher. This can be seen as an institutional narrative (Linde, 2009). The second narrative, *Everyday frustrations*, concerned the current situation of the Swedish school and consisted of small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2013) about a school system in a poor condition, with exhausted teachers and students not receiving the help and support to which they were entitled. The third narrative, *The new future*, consisted of small stories about a hypothetical future (Georgalou, 2017) that we interpreted as a bet on what the teaching profession could and would be, on new thinking, and on changing status positions.

In each temporal dimension, TUs played a key role as possible agents of change. TUs in general were referred to in quite negative terms, such as cowardly and uninterested, while local union representatives were depicted in a more positive light, as they were also close colleagues.

The quotes presented below were translated from Swedish into English as faithfully as possible. As the narratives emerged from different posts, we do not provide the numbers of likes or the kinds of emojis received by posts and comments.

## *Back to the future*

Users posted and commented on issues that had existed long before some of them were educated and became teachers. Several stories positively recalled more regulated working hours, usually referred to as part of an old agreement on the teaching obligation (Swedish: *undervisningsskyldighet*) that was in effect until the beginning of the 1990s. The teaching obligation presented an image, or a core memory (Linde, 2009), of the Swedish school system in an era before new public management. This was a time when the state, rather than municipalities, was responsible for the schools and teachers had almost equal teaching hours, while salaries were linked to years of experience and responsibilities. These stories evoked carefree times of a well-functioning school and respect for teachers and their assignments. Below are some examples of such retold stories:

> No more reforms, please. The only way forward is a return to what previously worked: teaching obligation, equal salaries, teacher autonomy, sufficient resources, solid teaching materials, and teachers' own working hours (Swedish: *förtroendearbetstid*) without meaningless meetings. Of course, this is a fantasy. The all-powerful winner never concedes anything without being forced to do so, and the holy agreement on cooperation has become a restriction that the union has lost the will to even try to get rid of. We still join in central negotiations like an abused wife in front of the husband who declares his good intentions while he continues to beat her.

> The proof of this tragic metaphor was the last main union agreement in 2018. Not even the pandemic, during which we are exposed daily to a threat to life, has been enough for the unions to realise and acknowledge their complete failure. Not a word has been uttered to demand that the union bosses step down. The battle may have been lost, our profession eroded, but sacrificing even more is not a viable option. Please realise that the winners are not even afraid of the consequences of a lost generation despite a shortage of teachers.

> Strike, my colleagues, is the only weapon powerful enough now!

These quotations capture oft-repeated stories about what was better in the past and how TUs' failures led to the erosion of the teaching profession, typically ending with a call for a

strike as the only solution. These calls for a strike seemed to reinforce the notion of TUs' failure to fulfil their task of creating good conditions for teachers. Traditionally, strikes have been a weapon used by trade unions to press their demands, but these stories presented TUs as overplayed, and it was the teachers themselves that called for a strike because Tus were unable to negotiate a good agreement. This institutional narrative about the past was an attempt to give members an agentive position as strikers, which, however, was not very powerful.

The prospect of resigned acceptance was present in several stories. It was about teachers who must be free on their vacations and in their spare time—something that had been possible before but had been made impossible by the latest agreements, which gave employers more power to decide teachers' working hours and tasks. Tus had caused the profession's alleged erosion. Changes were called for to enable Tus to reach an agreement with clearly defined working periods and reasonable conditions:

> Recent agreements have not benefited teachers. The union has failed to assert itself as strongly as it claims and has caused a divided, egocentric corps of teachers. Teachers who think more about their own leave than about those they are there for—the students—drive the profession's legitimacy to the bottom. I want to be able to be a professional teacher, with clear tasks, clear working periods, and reasonable conditions to complete the assignments.

The final quote from this narrative represents the retold stories about the "good old days" and TUs' role:

> You can change the absolutely basic premise (for being a teacher) and return to what was actually good. It is about making the teaching profession attractive. TUs need to talk about this. There is a lot that the TUs could do if they wanted to—if they represented us teachers. Tough words, but there is a lot to fight for.

The *Back to the future* narrative included strong stories about Tus' failure to preserve what was good. Constituting an institutional narrative (Linde, 2009), these were retold stories of great importance looking back at "the good old days" in a cyclical way, expressing hope for a hypothetical better future that took the past into account. However, this future was not particularly innovative. In this narrative, Tus were depicted as general or central organisations with no close relationship to the teachers.

### *Everyday frustrations*

This narrative was characterised by frustration with deplorable TUs that failed miserably in everything. Such small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2013) were about TUs that were supposed to fight on behalf of the teachers but did so in quite another way than the teachers wanted. A frequently told story dealt with the question of whether to be or not to be active in a TU.

This narrative highlighted the differences between unions at the central level and the local level represented by colleagues at school, which complicated teachers' relationships with their unions. Several conversations, or even arguments, consisted of small stories about the advantages and disadvantages of multiple unions, such as "several different unions are harmful" or "let's finally unite in a single strong TU." During the data collection, a new main agreement was presented, which was immediately rejected by most group members as wretched and paltry, as represented by the following excerpt from a longer thread:

> When agreements are vague and uninterpretable, they are seldom to our advantage. Clearer rules are needed, especially in New Public Management systems, in which everything must be made more efficient and in which the individual must bear the blame for not being good/efficient/skilled enough, even if it is the conditions that are wrong. Why do the unions not fight centrally? Locally, it is like banging your head against the wall of local politicians and their suggested cuts if there are no clear rules in the agreements.

In the analyses, it became clear that the narrative context and the interactions between the teachers were significant. Teachers who saw advantages and progress in the new agreement were well aware of their minority opinions. One of the few posts arguing that the new agreement included benefits for the teachers started as follows: "Can I write something positive about the main agreement?" and ended: "Now, every local representative needs to familiarise themselves with the new agreement and be able to use it to the benefit of the employees." This post received more likes than usual (70 thumbs up and smileys), and the thread included comments expressing both surprise ("Can the employer still do business as usual?") and curiosity ("Tell me more; in which paragraph?"). The discussion revealed that most teachers had not read the agreement; nevertheless, negative small stories dominated and were followed by complaints about TUs in general. The argumentation was the same as in the *Back to the future* narrative, in which "strike" was a buzzword used in almost every post. However, besides complaints, the threads also included repeated calls for teachers to become involved in TUs, which would otherwise become depleted and weaker. However, in response to a call to become involved, one teacher stressed the crippling burden that this would place on teachers in their frustrating everyday situation.

In the *Everyday frustrations* narrative, the small stories presented both employers and TUs as the teachers' antagonists, while the protagonists were the local unions and colleagues. The narrative revealed a kind of ambivalence: Teachers and local TUs were presented as neglected and helpless, creating an image of TUs divided between local and central tasks. Thus, TUs played a dual and tricky role, with TUs at the central level—incompetent and evil—on the one hand and their representatives at the local level on the other, trapped in the big system and hardly able to get the TUs involved in the teachers' everyday issues. However, there were also voices in these stories suggesting a change in this respect.

### *The new future*

The small stories shaping this narrative were not as common, but some stories directly concerned a new future in which things might be different and a kind of bottom-up or insider's professionalism might emerge. These small stories formed an antenarrative in which strikes were no longer considered a relevant means of improvement. In the new future, digitalisation created new possibilities for decision-making and action. Besides the call for more active engagement in union activities, small stories exemplified how to make TUs more involved in teachers' work by simply inviting them to participate in teachers' activities. The following quotations represent a small story of activism as a means of change:

> A willingness to "do something" or a feeling that the unions are not doing anything is not enough. Such demands spread easily in all directions and are sometimes contradictory. As the most basic thing, we need to try to agree on a platform with the most important, well-elaborated requirements. I agree that physical encounters are fundamental. A step we can take even now, during pandemic times, is to hold local meetings. In larger cities, there may be several local meetings. The first task will be to discuss the content and possible actions for the platform. Nothing prevents these meetings and discussions from being open to those who prefer to participate remotely within the local groups' areas.
>
> Even if we become several hundreds or even thousands, we are still a minority in relation to the number of union members. A central and ever-present effort must therefore be to present our platforms and actions and offer the unions the chance to participate in the actions that we ourselves may initiate.
>
> Don't you think that, with this focus, we could take an important step forward?

This small story can be considered a hypothetical future (Georgalou, 2017)—a clear bet on how to move forward by organising in ways that attract TUs, but without specifying the content to negotiate.

A small story emerged from one post, and comments on it centred on trust in digital tools. The story elaborated on possible digital demonstrations and concerned about how employers would react to such novelties. A more concrete idea about using digital tools was to let all members take part in an agreement and sign it digitally before it came into effect, as expressed in the following thread:

> Let the teachers [members] make a decision on the agreement before it is signed instead of the agents at the central TU. There can be a reference group, and we can have digital voting. There are great opportunities to democratise the agreement process using the web.

The discussion continued with the possibility and suitability of voting and it was pointed out that few teachers seemed to be sufficiently familiar with this new digital agenda. Nevertheless, another teacher predicted that TUs could even be democratised in this way:

> Most teachers are dissatisfied with how the TUs work today. If it is technically possible to let the members participate, we should do it. It feels like those negotiating at the central level control much more than they are allowed to. Democratise the TUs!

Some small stories depicted a school free from stress and anxiety, in which teachers had time for their assignments:

> It is about "staring time". This means time to do just that—stare, walk, run, and sort impressions and events without having to document, reply to emails, and refer to ordinances or plans. It would be seen as extended wellness for employees, I think. If you knew that there was room for staring time without anxiety about yet-to-be-graded tests, unfilled matrices, or uncopied documents, I think that many more tasks would be done easier and faster. It is so sad that we always have to learn the hard way, even though there is so much collective knowledge of the opposite.

Two replies to this post amounted to what we interpret as a call not only for the teachers but also for the TUs to take it into account:

> So wise! It would be an investment in the future. In addition, it may be possible to have a two-teacher system.
>
> It is not about being a superhero but just about being a regular civil servant.

The bet suggested in this antenarrative was that a new kind of democratic teacher professionalism might be possible if new techniques and social media were used. Although the content of this professionalism was vague, it involved elements of sustainability. The new professional teacher was presented as someone who had time to stare. This kind of professionalism was based on the idea that the teacher could decide what needed to be done and what to prioritise without having to be a superhero. Perhaps we can call it professionalism based on respect for teachers' discrete knowledge of how to handle professional tasks with colleagues.

# Discussion

In this study, we have been investigating narratives about the teaching profession and Swedish TUs jointly produced by Swedish teachers in two teachers' rebellion groups on Facebook. Our findings show that members of Swedish teachers' rebellion groups on Facebook are as dissatisfied with TUs as previously suggested (Bascia, 2008; Fidan & Erkocak, 2015). The various narratives describe disappointed teachers who struggle with their everyday frustrations, demanding a return to "the good old days" and calling for a strike as an immediate solution. However, there is also a narrative about a bet, a new hypothetical future in which proactive

teachers invite the unions to talks rather than wait for the unions' hitherto insufficient efforts to satisfy their demands. This quest for a more communicative relationship between TUs and their members that acknowledges the complexities of teachers' everyday work is in line with a more democratic kind of professionalism that ensures that teachers are heard and represented by their unions (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015).

What can these narratives tell us about the Swedish teaching profession? We understand them as expressions emerging from layers of institutional memories (Linde, 2009) of the Swedish school and teachers' working conditions. The present strained conditions (Lundström, 2015; Samuelsson et al., 2018) are contrasted with a sometimes romanticised view of past conditions. However, these institutional memories might hinder, rather than support, the teaching profession. Everyone probably knows that it is impossible to return to the previous status, and the narrative *Back to the future* is an expression of what *might* be different because it *was* once different—though in another societal context. Teachers and their relationships with TUs do not seem to have kept up with the present time of "fast policies" (Hardy et al., 2019). Who, then, struggles against time? Is it the teachers, the unions, or both? Maybe the basic idea of a relationship with the unions has been lost along with the loss of teachers' autonomy. Perhaps teachers simply do not have the same ability—or strength—to look ahead and make constructive suggestions when they are stuck in the "everyday swamp", leaving them with longings and wishes while calling for strikes. From a more general point of view, and in line with Ringarp (2011) this case illustrates how economic conditions and the recent development of the welfare state in Sweden limits the possibilities for TUs as well as teachers to raise their voice in the discussion of teacher professionalism.

The relationship between teachers and TUs seems fragile, and the way in which TUs are described hardly contributes to recruiting new leaders. In the long term, this might lead to an even more centrally controlled TU allied with employers and policymakers, with an outsider's perspective on teachers' working conditions (Lilja, 2013) that reinforces professionalism from above (Evetts, 2003). The question often asked in the groups' discussions about whether one should be a TU member is highly relevant not only for TUs as organisations but also for the Swedish school system, teachers, pupils (not least), and society at large. If teachers merely long for "the good old days" without taking responsibility, there is a risk that the "everyday swamp" that many teachers testify to will remain. We argue that the Swedish school system and teaching staff need to preserve the union tradition and unlock the potential of the relations between teachers and TUs based on respect and responsibility, as suggested in *The new future* narrative. This is a hypothetical future that holds what we see as a possible bet. This bet is based on the idea that teachers involved in Facebook rebellion groups can trust TUs' ability to balance loyalty demands based on NPM and external control with the teachers' need for improved everyday working conditions defined on a more collegial basis from within (Evetts, 2010; Löfgren & Wieslander, 2020). Such trust, at its best, could become a fertile soil for reflective teacher professionalism, which can be resilient to the negative effects of NPM

in the Swedish education system if TUs are ready to listen carefully to what needs to be done according to the teachers. However, teachers in Facebook rebellion groups also need to be clearer in their message if this bet is to become something more powerful than a mere statement on a social media platform.

A related concern is who will represent the teachers in the fight for improved working conditions in the long term. Will it be a democratically appointed TU representative or self-appointed administrators and loud voices in teachers' rebellion groups in social media? The question that arises is whether all teachers' voices can be represented, as in *The new future narrative*, or whether a certain vision of the professional will be presented, developed from teachers' experiences of being members of a teachers' Facebook group. Perhaps such a bet has the potential to lead to increased democratic engagement among teachers—in both TUs and rebellion groups—who want to work for healthier and more sustainable working conditions. This, however, seems difficult to accomplish without a clearer picture of what should be in focus and what the actual problem is. The bet identified in this study is more of a suggestion on how virtual collaborative resources can act as a vehicle for past and present experiences, thus functioning as part of an infrastructure that can shape a more autonomous teaching profession with more control over working conditions.

The narrative approach used in this study contributes to visualising the temporal dimensions of teachers' relations with TUs. Without an understanding of the historical layers depicted in the narratives and teachers' everyday frustrations, it is hardly possible to sketch a new hypothetical future. Temporality is another aspect of the data derived from the Facebook discussions. A post from a rebellion group member represents what Georgalou (2017) terms an immediate future "that constitutes part of a description or evaluation of the present" (p. 94) at the moment it is written. However, such a post might be a description of the past, as another member commented a few hours/days later. The cyclical time emerging from our data is both a strength and a limitation, as it is easy to become lost between the nowness and the hypothetical future. We are aware that some posts may have been hidden behind other posts and thus may have been less visible in our data. However, the concept of retold stories guarantees that we, in our analyses, used the small stories that best revealed the teachers' relations to TUs. Using the concept of bet contributed to a more nuanced understanding of temporality and enabled us to present a narrative containing ideas that might otherwise have been left outside our results as too naïve or unrealistic.

# Article history

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# Old Wine in New Wineskins: Professionalism and Managerialism in the Performance Appraisal Interviews of Pastors in the Church of Norway

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## Abstract

Performance appraisal interviews are a distinct feature of modern work organisations. A generic organisational script, appraisals have also been adopted by traditional professions within old religious institutions. Based on the theory of institutional logics, this article aims at providing new knowledge about the interplay of professionalism and managerialism in pastoral appraisals. It addresses the following research question: *How do professional and managerial logics intersect in performance appraisal interviews of pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway?* This study clarifies the function, contents and ambiguity of appraisals by interviewing pastors and their leaders and analysing their experiences and expectations of appraisals. The author discusses how ideal-typical professional and managerial logics are demarcated and hybridised in appraisals. With the church in a state of transition, this study shows how the pastor profession constructs itself in appraisals by drawing on both logics yet primarily safeguarding professionalism.

## Keywords

Performance appraisal interview, profession, managers, pastor, dean, church

# Introduction

Performance appraisal interviews are synonymous with modern work-life and have been described as "one of the most common managerial practices in contemporary organisations" (Sorsa et al., 2014, p. 57). They are defined as "recurrent strategic interviews between a superior in an organization and an employee that focus on employee performance and development" (Asmuß, 2008, p. 409). These dyadic interviews address developmental goals, collaboration and social relations at work as well as promotions and salary hikes (Meinecke et al., 2017). Over the last decades, appraisals have become a generic and taken-for-granted organisational arrangement. A plethora of terms indicates their prevalence: employee performance, job appraisal interview, employee review, and employee appraisal, or hereafter, simply appraisals.

Appraisals potentially enhance the effectiveness and work quality of individuals and organisations, which justifies their ubiquity across sectors. Meinecke et al. (2017, p. 1056) report four advantages of appraisals: first, they facilitate social interaction between employers and employees. Both parties exchange information that can promote internal communication and organisational learning. Second, participation is part of individuals' intrinsic motivation for development. Appraisals function as an avenue for feedback and performance evaluation as well as for growth opportunities and acquiring new competencies. Third, appraisals possess a democratic dimension since they give voice to the employees. Ownership of decisions is vital, and the setting of a conversation or interview enables the employee to speak up and share ideas and aspirations. Fourth, appraisals foster collaboration and support that improve relationships and organisational sense-making.

In the Norwegian context, conducting appraisals is part of the employer's responsibility (Kuvaas, 2011). The Norwegian terms *medarbeidersamtale* and *utviklingssamtale* can be directly translated as "co-worker conversation" and "development conversation", respectively. Appraisals involve direct communication between an employer and employee, where both parties participate in shaping decisions that impact the work situation. Although not mandated by the Working Environment Act, the legal demands regulating work-life can hardly be safeguarded without the dialogue facilitated by appraisals. Furthermore, co-determination resides in the structured meetings between the elected representatives of the workers and the employer. These practices also relate to the Norwegian norms of equality, work-life legislation and strong trade unions. Such contextual features distinguish Norwegian appraisals from those in other countries where evaluation feedback, scores and rated responses play a more central role (Spence & Wood, 2007).

Although numerous handbooks cover how to plan and conduct appraisals to reap their potential benefits (Sandlund et al., 2011), there is a general lack of knowledge about appraisals as an embedded organisational practice (Clifton, 2012). This is particularly so within religious organisations, from which I study a distinct case. No research is published on appraisals in the

context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway. This article presents empirical knowledge about pastors' and deans' perspectives on appraisals within this context. Appraisals within the church are not necessarily characterised by religious semantics as, by nature, they are a generic organisational practice imported into a religious context. Nevertheless, pastors may be expected to use religious language even when talking about prosaic work-related issues. This is linked to whether the professionals are identified as pastors or employees or both as well as to the interactions between pastors and deans. Thus, appraisals are a fertile ground to explore the negotiation spaces for professional and managerial logics. The overarching research question is *How do professional and managerial logics intersect in appraisal interviews of pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway?*

The article proceeds as follows: I first elaborate on the theoretical framework of this study—the institutional logics perspective—which I relate to the inherent duality of religious organisations. The empirical aspect of the study is then described in terms of data collection, sampling and analytical strategy. I then analyse the pastors' and deans' views on appraisals before discussing the findings and presenting the concluding remarks.

# Theoretical perspectives

## *The institutional logics perspective*

The theoretical perspective of institutionalism is integral to management and organisation studies (Scott, 2014). *Institution* is understood differently depending on the field of study. Conventionally, in the study of professions and organisations, institutions are patterns of conduct containing enduring elements from social life that affect actors' behaviour and thoughts (Scott, 2014). Within the broad stream of institutionalism, institutional logics constitute one trajectory. Logics or "rules of the game" are defined as "socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). Thus, logics are coherent sets of guidelines for practices, beliefs, values and meaning-making. They reside on a field level yet are revealed in organisations through language and practices and manifested in symbols and materials.

This article captures two ideal-typical logics—professionalism and managerialism—as they manifest in pastoral appraisals. Professions are closed expert occupations, characterised by self-governance and discretion (Molander & Terum, 2008, p. 20). Professional competence is built through formal qualifications, training and socialisation. Collegiality and consensual decisions, with professional managers serving as first among equals, characterise professionalism. Essentially, professions constitute a mode of organising work. I use professionalism or a professional logic to refer to these elements (Freidson, 2001). However, professionals have been reluctant to adopt new ways of organising that challenge their autonomy. In the 1970s,

New Public Management reforms introduced a managerial logic into public organisations that were traditionally inhibited and governed by professionals and public officials (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016). Since then, organisations have seen a general transition in work-life away from traditional professional leadership and towards organizationally-driven management (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Evetts, 2011). A managerial logic consists of market elements and bureaucracy and is characterised by efficiency, hierarchy, line management and budgetary and managerial control (O'Reilly & Reed, 2011).

Although these ideal-typical logics can be experienced as contradictory, they are combined within organisations, where individuals shape and modify the institutions of profession and management. A prevalent logic offers templates and building blocks that actors may assemble and use (Pache & Santos, 2013). Actors are carriers of logics; they voice them and function as logics representatives. The bridging concept of *hybridisation* refers to a blurring or a novel combination of two distinct entities that are normally found separately (Noordegraaf, 2015). Hybridisations of organisational elements have become increasingly relevant after the New Public Management reforms. One example of it is hybrid professional managers: professionals who have transitioned to managerial positions, where they lead peers (Evetts, 2011). The logics framework provides tools to analyse how professional and managerial roles and identities are embedded in wider cultural systems that both enable and constrain them (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999).

## *The inherent logic duality of religious organisations*

The dynamics between professional and managerial logics within the church are related to environing cultural developments and changing internal organising. Mintzberg (1979) points to a general movement from simple structures with strong charismatic elements into more complex structures of bureaucracy. In Western Christianity, the religious connection between the believer and the divine is formalised and routinised through organisational structures. Religious organisations are well-recognised and stable gatherings for religious purposes, where their long history facilitates a strong institutionalisation of beliefs and practices. The key characteristics of such organisations are the theological foundation that offers values and meaning, the role of the clergy as an intermediary and the participation of lay members (Torry, 2017).

The dichotomy of professionalism and managerialism is pronounced within the contemporary Norwegian context, where some professionals are civil servants or public officials and where the public *ethos* is key (Slagstad & Terum, 2014). For example, the Norwegian clergy traditionally had a magisterial character as they represented the hegemonic Lutheran church which was a state church since the Reformation (Sirris et al., 2021). They were incorporated and regulated in the hierarchy of the absolutist state. This legacy remained until the 1800s (Gilje, 2014). It continued to function as the religious branch of the state administration. As officials, they acted as intermediaries between the central government and the community

in which they were embedded. They simultaneously represented the worldly power of the Lutheran kingdom *and* were shepherds of the local parishioners. This duality, or hybridization, has been central to Norwegian pastors. In comparison, the system of denominational diversity in the United States regards the churches as voluntary associations strictly separated from the state. Pastors were primarily caretakers of their congregational members and local community (Blizzard, 1956). In contrast, the Norwegian clergy were directly employed by the Ministry of church affairs: pastors until 1988, and bishops and deans until 2012. Formally, all clergy were civil servants until 2017, when the church attained the status of legal subject at the national level and employed clergy.

Although developing as a contemporary organisation, the church is also an institution due to its history and self-understanding as a folk church. Importantly, in 2012 amendments to the constitution, introduced in response to the growing diversity within the Norwegian society, granted the church greater self-governance, and an ecclesial reform process enabled the growing organisational bodies to handle their internal affairs. New laws and reforms have contributed to creating an increasingly complex organisation, consisting of several governing bodies at the national, regional and local levels. Nonetheless, to date, the Church of Norway has a semi-official status as the majority church, and its operations fall partly within the public domain because it is financed by the state and municipalities.

As a religious organisation and a state church until recently, it assumes hybrid forms, as it is situated at sectorial boundaries (Sirris et al., 2021). Currently in the process of transforming into an independent folk church, it is clearer positioned within civic society, as explained by the law on faith and life-stance communities of 2021. This development reflects a general trend where older and traditional institutions, public and civic alike, have been fitted into the template of human service organisations by adopting similar scripts and standards (Bromley & Meyer, 2017). Like other institutions marked by professionals and officials, the church is de-contextualised into the shape of the modern organisation.

Changes to and within the church embed and impact professional work. Contemporary religious organisations are increasingly undergoing two changes: professionalisation and bureaucratisation (Hinings & Raynard, 2014). The first development concerns educational training and vocational commitment, while the latter is linked to division of labour, hierarchy and a greater emphasis on rules and regulations through increased administration and decentralisation. Professionalisation and bureaucratisation have also been identified in the Church of Norway (Sirris et al., 2021). Key to this development are the dual roles of Norwegian pastors who are both autonomous professionals of religion under the tradition of being state officials and employees in a modern work organisation. A duality of pastoral work was pinpointed in Blizzard's (1956) seminal study on how pastors conceptualise and balance dual logics: organisational versus spiritual tasks and priorities in their work. The balancing of the sacred and the secular is described as "the pastor's dilemma". The parallel structures of the spiritual and the organisational realms can eventually lead to internal secularisation where religious authority

becomes less important. In other words, managerialism can decrease religious authority and promote a societal organisation that integrates non-religious templates and rational structures. The introduction of managerialism into religious organisations is best described by the Trojan horse metaphor. A conceptualisation of the duality in pastoral work was also proposed by Askeland (2016, p. 111) who distinguished between functional and theological pastoral work. However, this is mostly an analytical distinction as the practical work of pastors blurs the divide between the forms of work as pastors balance religious, professional, public and occupational values (Sirris, 2019b).

In Norway, the institution of the pastor profession is in transition. Pastors are mentioned alongside physicians and lawyers as classical professions (Fauske 2008, p. 33). Nevertheless, the clergy are sometimes excluded from the ranks of professions due to the lack of a scientific basis (Slagstad, 2008, p. 57). Recent empirical studies highlight how being a pastor means combining a traditional calling and developing into a stronger profession (Sirris & Byrkjeflot, 2019). Pastor as a profession has also been criticised within the church because it represents a rationalisation of the pastor and grants limited autonomy as pastors are restricted by confessional obligations (Karle, 2000). However, a calling and a profession are not mutually exclusive; rather they represent complementary perspectives (Felter, 2010, p. 234).

Studies on the developing pastor profession reflect cultural changes in society and show how the church utilises societal organisational and managerial ideals to contextualise and gain legitimacy (Sirris, 2022). In contemporary work-life, increased management and employer's liability strengthen the rights and responsibilities of both the employers and the employees (Askeland, 2016; Gee et al., 2018). Sirris (2018) investigated pastors' and the diocese leadership's expectations from deans and found five types of competencies related to management and professional leadership. Management consists of analytical, administrative and relational competencies. Professional leadership, by contrast, consists of contextual and disciplinary competencies (Sirris, 2018, p. 40). Deans are expected to be well oriented with the work of pastors and with the activities in the parish (Huse, 1999; Sirris, 2018).

Traditionally, the clergy talked to the dean or bishop when they needed counselling. Such a personal conversation about spiritual matters was, according to McClure (2014, p. 270), "an institutional enacting and embodying of the theology of presence, particularly in response to suffering or need, as a way to increase among people the love of God and of neighbour". Given this tradition, adopting a managerial logic is challenging for deans, and it is evident in their dichotomising language and practices (Askeland, 2016; Sirris, 2019a; Stifoss-Hanssen et al., 2013). These conflicts between a religious historical legacy and a modern work organisation are evident in the appraisals.

To conclude this section, pastors are informed by a multi-faceted professional logic in flux—derived from Lutheranism and their traditional position as state officials—*and* framed by a

strengthened managerial logic. Appraisals are highly useful to study the duality of this profession as they are an organisational arrangement imported into the church and situated at the intersection of the logics that influence pastoral work. Appraisals can be a secular or scarcely theologised part of pastoral work. Nevertheless, the boundaries between the sacred and the secular are blurred. While the characteristics of logics are not mutually exclusive, they constitute two distinct ways of understanding pastoral work. As illustrated by the complexity of the pastor profession, logics do not necessarily replace each other, rather they have an additive effect when coexisting (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999).

# Research setting and methods

Appraisals constitute a space at the intersection of professional and managerial logics, and I use interviewees' narratives of employer—employee interactions in appraisals to illustrate the case. The Church of Norway serves as an interesting research setting for studying this phenomenon. Pastors enjoy a high degree of autonomy, even if they are led by a bishop heading the diocese. The eleven Norwegian dioceses have a total of 95 deaneries. The bishop delegates authority to the deans, who act as the closest employers of pastors, each managing 15–25 pastors in a deanery. Traditionally, the dean was first among equals, often being the eldest pastor in the area. However, the deanery reform in 2004 transformed the dean into a middle manager or an executing employer on behalf of the bishop (Stifoss-Hanssen et al., 2013). Local pastors since then are led by deans, who are consequently professionals with administrative duties and managers of the pastors in a deanery.

Pastoral appraisals have been compulsory in the church since 1993, but they have not been described in detail or researched (Huse, 1999, p. 23). The data reported in this article draw on an ethnographic study on church leadership completed in 2019. In a centrally located diocese that consented to participate, I first interviewed all nine deans individually. Then, in three deaneries under the diocese, I conducted a group interview each, involving six, seven and eight pastors. The interviews followed a semi-structured guide that included open-ended questions about management, roles, collaboration and interaction as well as the relation between pastoral work and being employed in a work organisation. All the interviews covered data on appraisals. The diocese shared a general template used for appraisals consisting of 12 questions addressing the work of the pastors under four themes: updates, collaboration, work and development. I conducted all the interviews in Norwegian and recorded and transcribed them verbatim. General information on the interviews is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of the data collection.

| Factors | Pastors | Deans |
|---|---|---|
| Individual interviews | 0 | 9 |
| Group interviews | 3 | 0 |
| Interviewees | 21 | 9 |
| Gender | 11 women, 10 men | 6 men, 3 women |
| Tenure (years in average) | 2–30 (12) | 3–25 (9) |
| Age (average) | 29–66 (44) | 52–68 (64) |
| Average length of each interview | 89 minutes | 74 minutes |
| Transcribed pages | 39 | 98 |

The collected data were initially coded using the NVIVO software. I identified material relevant to the theme of my study and used conventional thematic analysis for extracting information related to appraisals (see Table 2). The analysis focused on the research question and yielded three themes related to the appraisals. First, in terms of function, appraisals were taken for granted as an organisational arrangement and a natural practice in work organisations. Second, with regard to the contents of appraisals, both pastors and deans addressed the four overlapping topics: personal, relations, tasks and workload, and development. Third, pastors and deans alike described the ambiguities associated with appraisals. These were underpinned by a duality characterised by the integration of the spiritual and the secular.

**Table 2.** Illustrative excerpts from the data analysis.

| Exemplary quote | Code | Category | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Appraisals belong in a proper and serious organisation* | Modern work organisation | Taken-for-grantedness | Function of appraisals |
| *Appraisals are part of my job; I need to listen* | Management | Regularity | |
| *His job is to challenge us yet also support us* | Supervision | Responsibility | Contents of appraisals |
| *It is about relations, workload and development* | Interference and autonomy | Show interest | |
| *The old collegial role and the new managerial role* | Historical change | Secular or sacred | Ambiguity of appraisals |
| *It is not pastoral counselling; this is a work setting* | Identity | Personal or professional | |

# Findings

## *The function of appraisals*

In the interviews, the pastors talked extensively about patterns of communication and interactions with the dean. They distinguished between need-based occasional interactions and formal planned meetings held at a certain frequency. Although held annually, appraisals represented a significant milestone in the interactions between deans and pastors. The pastors regarded appraisals as an important indicator of working in "a proper organization". Analogously, if a dean did not prioritise appraisals, pastors associated the behaviour with "not being a serious employer" and interpreted the absence as a sign of not meeting modern work-life requirements. They criticised a dean who omitted appraisals one year due to his workload: "Yes, appraisals are compulsory, and I do not honestly think anyone is very excited about them. But they are useful." Appraisals were deemed as central to the pastors' work-life. In all three group interviews with the pastors, appraisals were expected. They were viewed as an expression of an employer's liability and the natural practice of a modern organisation, which included the church.

A topic common to all interviews was the overarching character of the appraisal: "It is about a holistic view." One of the pastors summed it up as follows:

> A good employer both leads and offers guidance. He challenges you with how your responsibility and commitments should be executed. He is responsible for the totality of the work experience—that you experience it as meaningful and challenging. He gives inputs on work-life balance. The appraisal concerns development and guidance.

This excerpt shows the high expectations from deans in terms of offering a holistic perspective and possessing diverse competencies. All the deans sought to prioritise annual appraisals of individual pastors. Two of them admitted to not always finding the time: "It is a part of our job as leaders, so I feel guilty when omitting it. It definitely should be arranged on a regular basis." The deans viewed appraisals as a tool that was both scripted and improvised. They recognised them as a rare opportunity to voice their expectations.

The deans also shared how appraisals were conducted: "We take turns and vary the themes that are discussed. A key activity during those takes is to ask questions. It is crucial to let the pastors talk; we need to listen." Appraisals varied considerably depending on the pastors. The deans explained how some pastors immediately began to evaluate the deans as employers, whereas others expected the deans to provide feedback, hoping that it would be in their favour. Nevertheless, the deans observed that appraisal conversations yielded loads of information about the parish and the present work situation, but little information flowed back from the deans to the pastors. It was important for the deans that the focus was on the pastors and their needs. This point surfaced in interview responses that referenced the present ecclesial hierarchical structure, whereby the deans' functions had been strengthened to include appraisals with all the pastors in the deanery. It also reflected the tradition of the dean as first among equals and a superior in the state hierarchy. Interestingly, a formal qualification for a dean is to be a trained and ordained pastor, and most deans engage in pastoral work as part of their position. This essentially makes them colleagues of the pastors in the deanery. The deans observed that the strengthening of their managerial role made it challenging for the pastors to strike a balance between the dean's dual roles as a colleague and a manager. Yet, the appraisals were primarily understood as managerial grounds where both parties expected the deans to act as interested and caring employers who had to address the needs of the professionals.

### *The contents of the appraisals*

Regarding the contents of the appraisals, pastors explained how during appraisals, it was expected that the dean will interfere and ask questions:

> Her job is to challenge us, not just to confirm. I am tired of vanilla conversations; we have enough of that elsewhere. The annual appraisal is the only time I really am taking stock of what it means to be a pastor and how to use time efficiently and prioritise.

Outside the appraisals, interference from the dean in ongoing pastoral work was not deemed popular. However, the typical responses to deans' interference were toned down during appraisals, where it was expected that the dean would be somewhat intrusive and ask direct questions. Thus, appraisals constituted a distinct setting with rules separate from those that governed the ordinary relationship between deans and pastors. One pastor underlined this: "I need supervision; *episcope*, spiritual oversight and guidance. But there is no need for the dean to get too close." Another pastor expressed a similar opinion: "You do not want a dean

sitting on your shoulder, like a surveillance camera. We have our reasons for enjoying autonomy."

The pastors associated appraisals with responsibility, which was contrasted against accountability: "The crucial thing is not to give a full account by reporting what we have done and want to do. Parochial statistics give such insights. Our work plans are also regularly discussed with the dean." Rather, during appraisals, the dean was expected to remind the pastors about their core pastoral responsibility: "The dean promotes ownership. She encourages us to own the pastoral role: 'This is yours, fulfil the role, do the task!' She encourages and supports our work."

This was interpreted as valuable affirmation and support. Another important appraisal topic highlighted by the pastors was that of growth and development:

> Pastor 3: In the appraisals, the dean should impose some questions upon us: "Where are you now in your life, your service, how are you growing?"
>
> Pastor 4: Yes, that's the appraisal for you, fostering growth and development. He is supposed to facilitate development. I don't like detailed liturgical guidance from the dean. Instead, he should ask: "How do you work with services? How are you developing? Do you neglect your life because you are working too much?" He gets a sense of how we use our time and efforts. We cover a wide range of tasks.

While commenting on the contents, all the deans emphasised the template for appraisals used in the diocese. Because they had conducted many appraisals and led individual pastors through the points, they referred mainly to those topics in their responses. The deans shared that they sent out a short form in advance to facilitate the pastors' preparation: "This is primarily due to formalities, and secondarily to sharpen awareness about the upcoming appraisal." While the order varied, the key topics discussed by all the nine deans in their appraisals were consistent. The quote below illustrates how deans exercised flexibility in their approach to appraisals:

> First, the opening is very broad: "How are you?" This invites the pastor to foreground issues that are burning or important in some way. This can be personal stuff about life situation, health, life phases or challenging work-related issues.

Another consistent topic in the appraisal discussions was relationships and collaboration. The deans emphasised that the pastors by no means worked alone as they had to constantly interact with many people:

> Where there are people, there are conflicts—or at least tensions. It is about relations, potential and ongoing conflicts, communication, distribution of tasks and responsibilities. Infrastructure and meetings. It is also about broader relations, for instance how the parish council is working.

Third, the deans addressed the different fields of work that the pastors engaged in. They used open phrases like "what is working or not, and how". Services and the key clergy tasks were discussed, including youth work and confirmands. Church attendance or statistics were also referred to. The deans considered various perspectives and initiated dialogue, "sometimes in confronting or provoking ways." They also covered work hours and workloads. The fourth topic that the deans spoke about in the interviews concerned professional development. One dean said the following:

> I ask about the pastor's own studies and immersion in Bible and prayer. For example, I remind the pastor about being a role model. I ask about their pastoral work instruction. Yet, I must admit that this is a balancing act. It depends on your relationship with the pastor. Some do not appreciate in-your-face questions.

The appraisals also included a section on formal competence, courses and studies. The development comprised participating in retreats that fostered spirituality. This was highly dependent on the special interest of the individual pastor. The deans wanted to plan for study leaves and prioritise such activities and the pursuit of pastors' interests. While pastors and deans offered similar descriptions about the contents of the appraisals, the latter emphasised the flow of dialogue and the flexibility of the template.

### *The ambiguity of the appraisals*

A recurrent theme in the pastors' reflections was the lack of a clear understanding of appraisals or their boundaries. In explaining this, the pastors referred to how the relationship between the deans and themselves had developed historically through the disestablishment of the state church. The long tenure of several of the interviewed pastors implied that they had work experience from before the deanery reform in 2004 when the deans were authorised to act as middle managers executing the employer's liability. These historical accounts surfaced in the discussion on the ideals of reciprocity and equality. The strongest link had now been formalised into a matter of employment. The interviewees clearly distinguished between what they called "the old role of the dean as our senior colleague" and "the new role of the dean as our boss". These two roles paralleled the work that the deans performed: pastoral counselling in the old days and conducting appraisals today.

Some interviewees talked about drawing boundaries between the dean as an employer on the one side and as a pastoral counsellor on the other side. These roles had implications for the perceptions of proximity and distance in appraisals. The pastors reported that the deans in general seemed hesitant about discussing personal information in the appraisals; however,

one pastor said: “I have been invited by the dean in appraisals to tell *everything*. I have been open, but afterwards, it did not feel right. You know, she is the employer.” On hearing this, other pastors in the group interview immediately endorsed this pastor’s experience, adding that appraisals were not meant for sharing highly personal information: “I agree, this is a work setting. The mundane and secular aspects of being an employed pastor ought to be the central stuff.” The conversation continued as follows:

> Interviewer: How do you see the spiritual role of the dean?
>
> Pastor 5: The dean has said very clearly that he is not doing pastoral counselling with us. That would not be natural. For that, we have to contact someone else. Yet, one day, a pastor here had the difficult task of telling a family that their son was dead. The pastor spoke to the dean the next day. Tears were shed. Of course, it got personal. Still, that was a case of caring for personnel, not pastoral counselling.
>
> Interviewer: I understand. Would you say that God belongs in appraisals?
>
> Pastor 6: A former dean prayed after we had had a discussion... That was wrong, a demonstration of church power. Appraisals are not about my relationship with God, but my relationship with my ministry, with my job and my leader, not God. We have other arenas for supervision and mentoring—those arrangements explicate my relationship with God. Appraisals are essentially something different.

A clear pattern in the pastors’ responses was that instead of defining appraisals positively, in terms of their characteristics, the pastors defined appraisals negatively, by specifying what they were not. The pastors contrasted appraisals with pastoral counselling, mentoring and supervision. However, these divisions were not always clear, as the pastors viewed the dean as a “spiritual coach”, whose role involved both guidance and evaluation. Pastors’ age seemed to play a role in this context, as the younger pastors clearly separated appraisals from traditional and spiritual conversations, while the elderly could not. Senior pastors with long tenure found it easier to grasp the deans’ spiritual and administrative functions as specified under the old role.

The nature of appraisals and their boundaries were also a matter of concern for the deans, particularly the role of religion in appraisals. For example, a dean shared that he did not pray in an appraisal setting:

> I do not want to signal that prayer is a language of power. Neither does the bishop. Yet, I could be clearer in asking: “Where do you get your energy from?” Or “Where is God in your life now?” I could ask: “What role does faith play in your life; how do you keep your faith?” But never: “How are you doing with Jesus today?” If they have problems of a pastoral nature, they must not come to me. But they can let me know, and I will find someone they can talk with.

However, another dean said that she ended appraisals by reading a passage of scripture and by asking if she could pray. The nine deans had different perspectives on how religion should be integrated into appraisals. One dean said, “In appraisals, God refers to how the pastors have time for studies and the promise of ordination. Yet these things border on pastoral counselling and the private realm.” The following quote shows how handling this issue requires sensitivity:

> There are many things they have not told me. We can ask questions that you cannot do in another organisation: “Where is God in all things?” I can ask questions that can help them live in as integrated a manner as possible. Faith is integrated into all we do. I have said to some during appraisals: “I think you should talk to a pastoral counsellor about this.”

The appraisals covered a broad range of topics. Although they were supposed to address the entire work situation of pastors, the spiritual dimension was seldom explicitly addressed; rather, it was downplayed by both parties.

# Discussion

Performance appraisal interviews of pastors constitute an intriguing meeting point, where a practice from modern secular work organisations is introduced in the church and into the realm of professional work. This friction triggers the question of how logics interact in the context of pastoral appraisals. This article provides new knowledge on the intersection of professionalism and managerialism by elucidating the function, contents and ambiguity of pastor appraisals. A distinct empirical contribution of this article is the exploration of experiences and expectations associated with appraisals. Interview data from the deans and pastors showed that appraisals were an accepted practice and did not stir any resistance. In fact, they were regarded as a symbol of a proper and modern work organisation. The pastors were more enthusiastic about appraisals than the deans. In a highly professionalised context, this finding is surprising given that appraisals are considered a tool stemming from a managerial logic, according to the literature (Asmuß, 2008; Sorsa et al., 2014). There are several explanations for this finding.

On a cultural level, professionals’ embracing of appraisals signals isomorphic pressures, indicating how organisations across sectors are becoming more similar. The principles of empowering rights and scientific rationalisation are valuable, irrespective of sectorial uniqueness (Bromley & Meyer, 2017). This development follows from the managed organisation and the strengthening of agency in general, notably so through reforms inspired by New Public Management (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016). How civic sector organisations, including religious ones, seek to maintain their identity in the face of increased formalisation, has been widely discussed. For example, traditional values and professionalism are safeguarded alongside instrumental pressures (Knutsen, 2012; Sirris et al., 2021). Pastors’ appraisals reflect this wider

development, where professional and managerial logics coexist. The characteristics of this coexistence are dependent on contextual cues.

Appraisals play out differently according to organisational contexts (Asmuß, 2008; Clifton, 2012; Sandlund et al., 2011). In this study, the pastors operated in the context of a Nordic model, where work-life is characterised by collaboration and equality. Further, "the new work order" emphasises flat structures and low power distance (Gee et al., 2018; Kuvaas, 2011). Additionally, the pastoral profession traditionally enjoyed extensive autonomy and was loosely regulated within the state church hierarchy (Felter, 2010; Gilje, 2014; Karle, 2000). The church organisation is still de-centralised with pastors working independently in their parishes where they do not engage daily with their dean (Huse, 1999; Sirris, 2019b). These features strengthen the logic of professionalism and yield less room for managerialism. The fact that deans are regarded as facilitators and experienced peers in this study aligns with the traditional ideals of professionally based leadership (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Evetts, 2011). Interestingly, the study also highlights generational differences in the attitude towards appraisals: the interviewed pastors were on average 20 years younger than the deans and favoured appraisals more than their senior deans.

Specific contextual features also influenced the contents of appraisals. Both pastors and deans shared a basic understanding of appraisals, which was institutionalised in the church at least 40 years ago (Huse, 1999). Mainly, appraisals in the church covered four themes: personal issues, relations, tasks and development. These topics resonate with the general notion of appraisals across sectors, which emphasises exchange of information, fostering good social relations, operation, and development (Meinecke et al., 2017). However, other aspects like extensive feedback, salary issues and goals, which are key to for-profit organisations, were hardly present in my data (Clifton, 2012; Spence & Wood, 2007). Thus, pastoral appraisals appear less instrumental, rational and goal-centric. Instead, they emphasise reflections and sharing of information and experiences. This is likely a result of the collegial relations between the professionals and their leaders (Evetts, 2011). The pastors expected the deans to remind them about their responsibility in an empowering way. Thus, ensuring pastors' development was key, both by challenging and supporting the pastors.

Given the scarce focus on achievements, pastoral appraisals can hardly be called *performance* interviews. There is hardly any trace of accountability; instead, there is a focus on responsibility. This, in turn, relates to the very nature of pastoral work where goals and accomplishments are difficult to measure, at least quantitatively, and their public *ethos*. This is contrary to the hallmarks of managerialism as endorsed in New Public Management reforms (O'Reilly & Reed, 2011). The professional logic emerging in this study is framed by the pastors' history of being professionals and officials within a state bureaucracy. However, hierarchy is also a characteristic of managerialism, which shows how the elements of logics can overlap (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999).

The pastoral appraisals showcased an alliance between professionals and their hybrid professional managers (Noordegraaf, 2015). Deans' function in the appraisals was to the benefit of the profession. This resonates with Suddaby and Viale's (2011, p. 427) observation of professionals who develop a "schizophrenic ability to conform to the pressures of their employing organizations while, simultaneously, using the resources and power of the organization to initiate profound social change". My study illustrates how this strategy highlights agency in interpreting, handling and reframing pressures. In the context of pastoral appraisals, the professionals have taken control of this organisational arrangement to serve their own interests. This is facilitated by the deans being hybrid professionals (Sirris & Byrkjeflot, 2019).

The empirical material shows some interesting tensions between the religious-professional and managerial-organisational logics, reflected in the diverse understandings of the relations between dean and pastors. Instead of controlling the pastors, the deans addressed issues important to the pastors. To fulfil their duties, both parties relied on collaboration with the other. The dean embodied the duality of being a boss and a colleague. While this relation highlights a collegial expression of professionalism, it simultaneously encodes an employer—employee relation, revealing a managerial logic. This duality underpins the entire practice of appraisals. Paradoxically, pastoral appraisals are essentially not managerial grounds but profoundly professional. Thus, it is old wine in new wineskins. This metaphor signals that although the appraisals as such are novel, their function, contents and ambiguities are not.

The nature of this professionalism needs further elaboration as it is contrasted with counselling and defined in opposition to spirituality and a discussion of theology. Given the new understanding of the dean as an employer, all the pastors agreed that they should not seek counselling or discuss highly personal matters with their managers during appraisals. This indicates the bureaucratisation and professionalisation of the church (Hinings & Raynard, 2014; Sirris et al., 2021). An organisational framing has, in turn, implications for the relations between pastors and deans. The two parties are no longer only colleagues or leaders and followers, but employers and employees. This reflects a development in professionalism towards organised professions (Evetts, 2011). The pastoral appraisals follow a script and are defined in contrast to pastoral counselling. This phenomenon draws on psychological and theological resources to deepen the understanding of the pastoral relationship. According to McClure (2014), pastoral counselling is distinct from other forms of counselling and psychotherapy. This is due to the role and accountability of the counsellor and the counsellor's understanding and expression of the pastoral relationship. Pastoral counsellors represent the central images of life and its meaning as affirmed by their religious communities, and through counselling, they offer a link to that understanding of life and faith. Thus, such counselling is inherently different from appraisals. Appraisals denote a break from the pastoral and ecclesial heritage. Finally, the interview data revealed that appraisals were not understood as an arena for theological disputes, even though some deans prayed or read a passage of scripture in the setting.

Table 3 summarises the professional and managerial logics discussed in this article. I underline that these are ideal-types that partly overlap in practice. This is particularly due to the hierarchic and administrative elements present in the professional bureaucracy derived from the state church tradition and that is central also to managerialism. The present study has illuminated how they hybridise in the appraisals.

**Table 3.** Ideal-typical professional and managerial logics in appraisals of pastors.

| **Logic Characteristics** | **Professional logic** | **Managerial logic** |
|---|---|---|
| *Original domain* | Religion and state | Secular |
| *Nature* | Contextual | Generic |
| *Framing* | Traditional calling and state official | Modern occupation |
| *Organising* | Collegium and hierarchy | Hierarchy and line management |
| *Focus* | Spirituality | Work conditions |
| *Type of professionalism* | Occupational professionalism | Organised professionalism |
| *Pastor* | Independent colleague and fellow state official | Employee |
| *Dean* | First among equals | Employer |
| *Formalisation of leadership* | Elected and appointed leader legitimised by ecclesial and state authorities | Employed manager with organisational mandate |
| *Leader role* | Self-leadership | Separate leader role |
| *Answerability* | Responsibility | Accountability |
| *Principle of control* | Trust | Formal authority |
| *Principle of work* | Realising calling and fulfilling obligations | Empowering rights and duties |
| *Basis of authority* | Supervision and mentoring | Employer's liability |
| *Competencies* | Contextual and disciplinary | Administrative, relational, strategic |
| *Working hours* | Unlimited | Limited, planned and reported |
| *Organising principle* | Autonomy and discretion | Regulations and standardisation |
| *Conversational space* | Colloquium and pastoral counselling | Appraisal interviews |
| *Tasks* | Theological<br>• Leading by word and sacrament<br>• Teaching and leading a life of faith<br>• Building the Christian community | Functional<br>• Managing co-workers<br>• Leading by observing, listening and following up<br>• Strategic development by planning and reporting |

## Concluding remarks

Despite their prevalence as a generic organisational script and managerial tool, performance appraisal interviews are under-researched within the studies of professions. From the institutional logics perspective, this article presents new knowledge on how managerial and professional logics meet in appraisals. It shows how the logics are not fixed and unmalleable, but rather worked upon and shaped by both professionals and managers. While the two parties share an understanding of the function and contents of appraisals, they emphasise slightly different aspects. In the context of the church, the appraisal is a rather novel concept, which is evident in the ambiguity associated with it. A distinctive practice, appraisals are different from pastoral counselling. The pastor profession constructs itself in appraisals by drawing on both logics yet primarily safeguards professionalism. The result is a better work-life for the individual pastor and a "normalization" of the church as a traditional institution towards a modern organisation.

One of the limitations of this study is the small number of interviews conducted for data collection. Even if drawing on the perspectives of both professionals and managers, future research should include additional data sources. Observation studies can provide valuable granular data and capture the practice of appraisals. The same phenomenon could also be explored on a greater scale using mixed methods and quantitative approaches. Future studies could also investigate the various logics in greater detail beyond an ideal-typical approach, not least how several logics intertwine. Lastly, it would be beneficial to study the religious dimension of the pastoral profession and examine why religion is not articulated more clearly in appraisals.

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# The Psychosocial in Norwegian Teacher Education in Light of Epistemic Objects and Therapeutic Culture

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## Abstract

In this article we examine how therapeutic culture disseminates into and affects teacher education in Norway. This is done through a close examination of knowledge practices revolving around the term *psychosocial*. Based on fieldwork data and drawing on Karin Knorr Cetina's concept of epistemic objects, we analyse how the psychosocial is practised, taught, and interpreted in a Norwegian primary and secondary teacher education institution. We identify three key epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial: ubiquity, emotional orientation, and self-centeredness. Due to its oscillation between compatibility and friction, the psychosocial is both nurturing and disruptive, intuitive, and demanding, meaningful and alienating. More broadly, the application of the psychosocial in teacher education can be understood in light of the interplay between intellectualisation and emotionalisation processes in modern societies. By providing insight into a previously unexplored area, the article contributes to new understandings of the changing cultural conditions of the teaching profession.

## Keywords

Psychosocial, therapeutic culture, teacher education, epistemic object, professional knowledge, Karin Knorr Cetina

## Introduction: The psychosocial in teacher education

Since 2003, a good psychosocial school environment that promotes health, well-being and learning has been an individual legal right for every schoolchild in Norway. This formal responsibility of schools also affects the professional responsibility and knowledge base of teachers, as they are expected to acquire certain knowledge, competencies, and skills necessary to ensure a good and safe psychosocial school environment for all pupils (Mathias, 2021).

These expectations of teachers are articulated in research, policy documents, legislation, and curricula. For example, researchers such as Mirjam Harkestad Olsen (2019), Jorun Buli-Holmberg & Cristian Blomeid Engebretsen (2019), and Gurun Aas (2019) identify teachers as responsible for creating a good psychosocial environment for every school child. In the official Norwegian report, *To belong. Measures for a safe psychosocial environment*, it is argued that there should be more emphasis on mental health issues and psychosocial risk factors in teacher education. This includes knowledge of the symptoms of mental illness and how to prevent mental illness (NOU 2015: 2, p. 339). And the national guidelines for primary and lower secondary teacher education, which provide binding standards for the curriculum and programmes of teacher education, state that the topic of the psychosocial learning environment must be covered for all student teachers. This includes "the necessary skills, knowledge, and competence a teacher needs to create a safe psychosocial school environment and to prevent and deal with violations, bullying, harassment, and discrimination" (Munthe & Melting, 2016, pp. 10–11).

Despite the emphasis on and advocacy of specific knowledge and competencies that should enable teachers to provide good psychosocial environments, we do not know how the psychosocial is practised, taught, or interpreted in teacher education, nor how this relates to broader socio-cultural conditions such as therapeutic culture and the knowledge society. In order to explore this, we have chosen to adopt an epistemic object-centred perspective according to sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina, who defines epistemic objects as processual, always incomplete, and endowed with (structuring, affective, and epistemic) agency.

The purpose of this article is to analyse how the widespread and complex domain of the psychosocial emerges as an epistemic object in Norwegian teacher education. To do this, we will draw on data from fieldwork conducted at a Norwegian teacher education institution. Our main research questions are: *What are the characteristics of the epistemic object of the psychosocial in Norwegian teacher education? How is this epistemic object conditioned by therapeutic culture?*

# The psychosocial in context and previous research

Mental health has become a major concern in modern societies, including the mental health of children. The success of societies and nations is often linked to the mental well-being of their young people, making it a central responsibility of the state to address this issue (Buchanan, 2012). The prevalence of *a therapeutic culture*, which incorporates psychological knowledge and practices into all aspects of contemporary societies (Nehring et al., 2020), has also had an impact on education. Concepts of counselling and therapy have been adopted and normalised in the field of education. (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Smeyers et al., 2007). This development includes the growing influence of psychological knowledge and practice in the teaching profession.

The psychosocial is a well-established psychological term that is widely used in education, both in the context of preventing mental illness and disruptive behaviour, and in the context of promoting subjective well-being and happiness (Mathias, 2021). Semantically, the combination of the terms *psycho* and *social* implies the interrelationship of the two spheres, the psychological and emotional life of the individual on the one hand, and the social sphere on the other. The term originated in the fields of psychiatry and medicine in the 1990s and has gained widespread attention as an interdisciplinary scientific concept for investigating the complex interplay between psychological and social factors (Roseneil, 2014).

Globally, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has played an important role in promoting the term psychosocial in education, often including it in its commitment to promoting health and well-being in schools (WHO, 2003). Existing research also highlights the strong relationship between the psychosocial environment in schools and pupils' well-being, learning and mental health (Allodi, 2010; Bowe, 2015; Green et al., 2016; Haapasalo et al., 2010). This is evident in Aldridge et al.'s (2018) definition of the *psychosocial school climate* which encompasses all "the attitudes, norms, beliefs, values and expectations that underpin school life and affect the extent to which members of the school community feel safe" (p. 155). Schools are seen as arenas where children's emotional and social capacities are managed and nurtured, for example, through deep engagement with pupils' personal backgrounds and building lasting and authentic relationships (Edwards et al., 2019; Tiernan et al., 2020).

The establishment of the term psychosocial in education intersects with teachers' professional duties centred on relationships and care, which have historically been integral to the teaching role (Hermansen, 2017). Teachers are seen as key actors whose (caring) actions have a crucial impact on the psychosocial well-being of pupils (Aldridge et al., 2018; Green et al., 2016; Smith, 2013). For example, a healthy psychosocial environment is often considered to be based on good pupil-teacher relationships (Allodi, 2010; Bouchard & Smith, 2017; Haapasalo et al., 2010; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). To facilitate learning, teachers are expected to act as psychosocial caregivers and health promoters. Warren and Robinson (2018) argue that "teacher emotions are key factors that impact classroom climate and therefore educational

outcomes and student success" (p. 22). The psychosocial is therefore often associated with teachers' relational and social-emotional virtues such as sensitivity, caring, empathy, deep engagement, and self-reflection (Bouchard & Smith, 2017; Chow et al., 2015; Van Petegem et al., 2008).

In addition to the more traditional aspects of caring relationships, the growing body of literature on the psychosocial brings new concepts to the professional role of the teacher. This changing professional role is evident when the psychosocial is conceptualised within a psychoanalytic framework. Viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, the classroom is transformed into a counselling room where the past experiences of individual pupils become highly relevant to social and emotional (inter)action (Hogan, 2019; Walsh, 2014; West, 2014). This includes, for example, psychodynamic training of teachers to enable them to identify and respond to the unconscious drives, emotional forces, and affective expressions of school children (Hogan, 2019).

The emphasis on the psychosocial environment in educational research is consistent with general features of therapeutic culture. A therapeutic approach to education typically emphasises affective and emotional aspects and sees school as an arena for addressing pupils' emotional problems and for promoting positive emotions (Smeyers et al., 2007, pp. 12, 14). The dissemination of therapeutic knowledge in educational practice has faced criticism (Brunila, 2012; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Irisdotter Aldenmyr & Olson, 2016). For example, Ecclestone (2011) argues that therapeutic education represents an attack on knowledge itself and on young people as knowers, because it values subjective-emotional skills over knowledge. It assumes an emotionally fragile subject unable to cope with an elitist, discriminatory education system, rather than a capable subject who is eager to learn about the outside world. Others recognise that the dissemination of therapeutic thought and knowledge has opened the door to a more liberal, caring, and individual-based view of human suffering (Aubry & Travis, 2015; Illouz, 2008; Smeyers et al., 2007; Wright, 2008). For example, Wright argues that therapeutic culture has exposed the abuse of some of the least powerful in society, legitimised emotional pain, and developed a common language for articulating injury to the self and enhancing caring relationships (Wright, 2008).

Sociologist Eva Illouz (2007) has identified a significant cultural consequence of this phenomenon. In her view, therapeutic narratives focus on emotional and psychological suffering, while offering rational techniques to remedy and alleviate such suffering. In other words, in the context of a therapeutic culture, emotions are now perceived and managed with a focus on intellect and rationality. This *rationalisation* of social relations at the intersection of the domains of expertise and emotion is an important aspect of the discussion in this article.

# Analytical framework: Karin Knorr Cetina and epistemic objects

To examine the epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial in Norwegian teacher education, we draw on Knorr Cetina's concept of the *epistemic object* as a means of analysis. The starting point for her object-centred approach is the recognition that expert knowledge *spills over* and permeates all areas of social life in the knowledge society (Knorr Cetina, 2001). The spill-over effect that expert and academic cultures have on other domains is ambivalent in its consequences, as it both offers opportunities for more creative, productive, and meaningful activities, but can also lead to confusion, conflict, and uncertainty (Knorr Cetina, 1997). For Knorr Cetina (1997), an important task is therefore to trace knowledge and the ways in which it is constitutive in social relations.

To achieve this task, Knorr Cetina (2001) defines epistemic objects as a complex amalgam of material objects, processes, ideas and concepts, factual information, strategies, policies, and so on. In other words, epistemic objects are processual entities that drive, govern, attract, and organise knowledge communities. They are characteristically open, question-generating, incomplete and endlessly unfolding. They provoke questions but also generate meaning. Their *unfolding ontology* rejects completeness and an end point. When scientifically interrogated, epistemic objects reveal themselves by increasing their complexity. They typically activate different opportunities for exploration, as they are taken up and developed further by practitioners in knowledge communities (Nerland & Jensen, 2012, pp. 104–106). Their openness to exploration, combined with their reluctance to be fully understood, results in an ongoing state of *desire* that is both affective and intellectual (Knorr Cetina, 2001, pp. 181–184).

With her account of epistemic objects, Knorr Cetina establishes a middle ground between essentialism and social constructivism. Epistemic objects are neither entirely ahistorical and asocial, nor entirely reducible to their respective social environments. The relational and processual dimension underlying this understanding of knowledge is not a deconstruction and dissolution of knowledge, but rather a recognition of knowledge as a central agent. Knowledge is an entity with epistemic integrity and agency that influences and structures its environment, rather than a tool devoid of relevant content that reproduces and maintains power structures. Thus, the concept of epistemic object is useful because it allows us to include the dimension of content in our sociological approach to knowledge.

The analysis of the psychosocial as an epistemic object provides a fruitful analytical framework because it calls for a close look at the psychosocial in terms of its epistemic content, its agency, and its practised complexity in teacher education. It is relevant because the teaching profession has also become entangled in the complex structures of epistemic objects. It has become more research-oriented and related to a variety of knowledge producers (Jensen et al., 2022). The professional community of teachers, which used to be highly autonomous and

focused on embodied and experiential knowledge, has increasingly adopted abstract and theoretical knowledge (Klette & Carlsen, 2012). As summarised by Nerland and Jensen (2012), "the role of Knorr Cetina's micro-level epistemic objects draws attention to the multiple processes of knowing and how they simultaneously have both stabilising and transformative effects on professional practice" (p. 106). Moreover, Knorr Cetina's notion of spill-over effects in knowledge societies, which she closely links to epistemic objects, offers a productive perspective for describing the complex relations and processes of dissemination and adaptation that occur around the psychosocial, involving a wide range of expert and non-expert fields.

Concretely, the application of Knorr Cetina's theory of epistemic objects allows us to analyse the role of the psychosocial in teacher education in its processual, collective, and emergent dynamics. It enables us to understand the psychosocial as both socially conditioned and as integral with epistemic content. And it directs our analytical attention to the agency of psychosocial knowledge, that is to how it organises and mobilises epistemic processes (e.g., of knowledge dissemination, acquisition, and interpretation).

# Method

## *Data and sample*

This study draws on empirical data from fieldwork conducted in a primary and secondary teacher education institution (for years 1–10) in a large Norwegian city. The education of primary and secondary school teachers in Norway is subject to national regulations and has undergone a number of changes in recent years. As part of a comprehensive reform package, the teacher education programme was extended from a four-year to a five-year master's programme in 2019. This change was implemented in the year following the fieldwork. As a result, the student teachers who were sampled for this study received their formal teacher education in the four-year programme.

The fieldwork was conducted in the Department of Pedagogy over the course of eight weeks in one semester in 2018. Pedagogy is a diverse subject that consists of different epistemological branches. The psychosocial school environment is one of many branches of knowledge taught in the department. Mathias observed and participated in courses and activities on "Pedagogy and student knowledge", which is a compulsory subject for all student teachers. Throughout the semester, the psychosocial was an overarching curriculum theme and was compulsory for all student teachers.

Observation was an important method of gaining insight into the knowledge practices of teacher educators and student teachers. The data include observations of 19 lectures and seminars, totalling 56.5 hours. The student teachers were divided into classes supervised and taught by teacher educators, following a structure similar to that of conventional schools. Observations were carried out in three of these classes, two of which were taught by the same teacher educator and the third by a different teacher educator. At times a more participative

role was required, with Mathias engaging in conversation and asking questions, particularly during group work and more interactive parts of the lectures. This also included conversations with teacher educators and student teachers in informal settings where more direct questions about psychosocial knowledge were raised. Mathias also attended staff meetings (28 hours in total). These meetings included teacher educators planning and discussing future lectures and curricula and student practicum in schools.

Written material was another important piece of data derived from the fieldwork. This included course materials such as teaching materials, lecture notes and tutorial handouts. In addition, the data consists of assignments completed by all student teachers in one of the observed classes: 27 individual and 10 group assignments. The group assignments were approximately 15 pages of students' summaries of what they had learned during the semester; and the assigned reflections were three pages of students' thoughts, experiences, expectations and concerns about their future role as teachers.

To complement the fieldwork data, two recorded unstructured group interviews were conducted with a total of seven student teachers (all female). The first interview was prearranged with three student teachers. They were asked about their immediate reactions to the term the psychosocial, where and how it appeared in their training and their thoughts on being professionally responsible for the psychosocial environment. The second recorded interview took place spontaneously after a seminar in which student teachers presented their current assignments. Four of them were writing on topics related to teachers' responsibility for a good psychosocial environment. They were invited to talk about their work and experiences after the seminar. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly after they took place.

The study was registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and followed the principles of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality (Fangen, 2004). Participation in the study was pre-approved at the organisational level. Written informed consent forms were provided to individual participants in advance. The teacher education institution where the fieldwork took place is anonymous and only limited information about its size, profile, and location is provided. No data that could reveal the personal sensitive identity (e.g. ethnic background, political beliefs, or health status) of research participants were stored or published (Fangen, 2004). Student assignments were anonymised by the course leader before being given to Mathias. Sensitive information in this study may also include criticism and conflict in the workplace that may affect the professional status of teacher educators. The decision to withhold requested information about other participants during fieldwork was made to maintain confidentiality, which protects the non-disclosure of sensitive information (Haugen & Skilbrei, 2021).

## *Analysing and presenting the data*

The analysis of the data was carried out in an iterative-inductive manner, which means that data collection, analysis, and writing are interrelated. Iterative describes the analytical process as a spiral movement. Collecting, analysing, and writing is an organic practice. Inductive means having an open mind and letting the data speak for itself. (O'Reilly, 2009). In essence, this analytical design allows the rigid divergence of data before theory and theory before data to be transformed into a more flexible process that requires a movement back and forth between analysis, conceptualisation, reading, reflection on theory, and writing (O'Reilly, 2009; Berg, 2004). More specifically, this means that our analytical framework, based on Knorr Cetina's notion of the epistemic object, played a role in all stages of the data analysis. While the data were conducted with an open mindset, it is clear that our theoretic-analytical backdrop to a certain degree steered our attention to specific aspects of observed phenomena, for example to the epistemic processes and collective interactions grouped around the psychosocial, as well as to the affective and intellectual responses to epistemic content. In the stages of data analysis and interpretation, our analytical framework prompted reflection on the relationship between immediate findings and broader social contexts, while the empirical data also challenged our theoretical preconceptions and sparked critical discussions about the notion of epistemic objects.

The empirical data was organised and synthesised into open codes and then transformed into overarching themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The first stage of analysis involved familiarising with the data and confirming primary observations made during fieldwork. A large number of codes were then created by identifying and labelling significant sections of the data. Hierarchical coding structures were used to capture the richness of the data and to create codes that allowed for different interpretations in order to systematically organise the codes and identify patterns. HyperRESEARCH was used for this purpose. The codes were then synthesised into overarching themes. For the final phase of the analysis process, we were inspired by Eggebø's (2020) concept of "collective qualitative analysis". Conducting qualitative research in a collective way can be a fruitful method to stimulate creativity, innovative ideas, and flexibility, while maintaining the academic quality of the work (Eggebø, 2020). Therefore, in a collaborative workshop we visualised and mapped the themes derived from the previous stages of analysis. We engaged and played with the different components, discussed issues and themes. Based on this mapping, we created three epistemic categories, which are discussed below. To present and illustrate them, we have used examples from all data sources—observations, written material, group interviews. In this way, we hope to demonstrate the in-depth and multi-perspective basis on which this study is based. All examples have been translated from Norwegian into English by Mathias.

# Results: Three epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial

In what follows, we discuss findings from the fieldwork, organised into discussions of three key characteristics that we believe best describe the epistemic object of the psychosocial: *ubiquity*, *emotional orientation*, and *focus on the self*.

## *1. Ubiquity*

A central characteristic of the psychosocial is its ubiquitous presence. It belongs to the key features of this epistemic object to affect and disseminate into a wide range of subjects, such as *inclusion* (with emphasis on pupils with special needs), *adapted education*, *diversity*, *children's upbringing*, *learning communities* and *the professional role of the teacher*. All of these topics were considered by the teacher educators as related to knowledge about and methods associated with the psychosocial. It was clear from observations and conversations that teacher educators believed that topics related to the psychosocial should be integrated into every stage of teacher education. This ubiquitous character of the psychosocial was explicitly acknowledged by a teacher educator during a lecture:

> It [the psychosocial learning environment] includes everything we are working with now [inclusion and adapted education]. A major area [is] […] mental health and the social. It concerns everything. How we work together and how we see each individual pupil.

When viewed through the psychosocial lens, notions of emotional well-being and mental health promotion permeated every aspect of teacher education, demonstrating the epistemic object's agency to adapt to and cover different aspects of the curriculum, govern epistemic processes and interactions, and affect the perceptions of the human actors involved. Several student teachers were surprised by the emphasis placed on these issues, as evidenced by one student's response to another in a focus group interview:

> I think the same as you that I have become very aware of the psychological process that happens in the minds of the pupils and their social interactions at school. Because I have not had any previous experience of being a teacher before I started here. And it has really preoccupied me a lot, because you see that it is almost only 30 percent teaching, and then the rest is psychosocial work. (focus group, student 3)

This understanding of their professional mandate increased the motivation of some students to become teachers, while it threatened others. The teacher mandate, as seen from the epistemic viewpoint of the psychosocial, as all-encompassing and broad was challenging for both student teachers and teacher educators. For example, a lecture on inclusion (with an emphasis on pupils with special needs), covered a wide range of learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD, autism, migration-related learning difficulties, and mutism. The sheer volume of content meant that teacher educators could only cover each type of learning disability in a superficial way. And it was not possible for the student teachers to gain in-depth

knowledge and theoretical insight into of this content, given the time frame and format of the course. Moreover, complex therapeutic terminology such as *affect regulation* and *mentalisation*, which was regularly discussed in lectures, was difficult for student teachers to grasp in the limited time available. In the case of the psychosocial, the epistemic object's increasing complexity generally does not stimulate a desire to know more but rather creates insecurity and superficial engagement.

This was explicitly verbalised in conversations Mathias had with student teachers. One student shared that she had been informed about the responsibility of teachers to create a good psychosocial environment, but she lacked the knowledge of how to achieve this. Another student expressed the same concern in a written reflection:

> I am not supposed to punish violations, [but] build self-esteem through trust, open-mindedness, and comfort. But how do I do that if a pupil has attachment difficulties, ADHD and is on the autism spectrum? I am supposed to build relationships according to the circle of security, but where do I start? (student reflection 7)

For student teachers, the psychosocial environment is a domain in which they are expected to *act* in order to achieve specific outcomes such as good mental health and well-being. Researchers, government bodies, and the public identify teachers as central actors who can and should influence the psychosocial environment of schools and the psychosocial well-being of individual pupils. This responsibility was also a theme in the teacher education observed. In seminars and lectures, student teachers were frequently made aware of the extent of their responsibility to create a positive psychosocial environment in their future classes. Thus, the epistemic object of the psychosocial made itself felt among the students in a tangible manner as it related to real-life situations in which the well-being and mental health of children were at stake, a degree of responsibility that two students reflected on during the focus group interview:

> I think of everything that can backfire on me. That if I cannot do it, then it is my fault that someone is not doing well at school. Also, I know that it's not just my fault, there are quite a few factors, but the teacher gets quite a lot of blame then. (focus group, student 1)

> You have such a freaking amount of responsibility. Everybody should be learning, everybody should get adapted education, everybody should be happy, nobody should have a tough time in school […]. It's just a lot […]. So you know that it's your responsibility, but you don't know how to respond to that responsibility. So, it feels very overwhelming. (focus group, student 2)

In response to this perceived responsibility conveyed by the psychosocial, several student teachers called for concrete tools and systematic knowledge. As one of the students inter-

viewed said, “I miss a programme, a system, and talking about it in a group.” If the psychosocial provoked a need for solid and hands-on knowledge among student teachers, their teacher educators did not necessarily see this as part of their mandate. Educators agreed that knowledge could not be reduced to specific tools to be applied in teaching situations.

## *2. Emotional orientation*

“The psychosocial goes beyond the various school subjects and concerns rather the way pupils feel.” This comment was made by a teacher educator in a lecture and reflects the kind of emotionality that the epistemic object of the psychosocial aims at. The teacher educator’s statement brings into focus the emotional subjective state of the individual pupil. This emphasis on the emotional pupil subject was a common theme in the lectures and seminars, the student teachers written assignments, and focus groups. The balance between formal curriculum knowledge and concern for the emotional wellbeing of the pupil is something that the students consciously considered, as the following quotes show:

> I think I must have been a little naive and thought that if you are fond of conveying knowledge and fond of teaching, then in a way it is enough. But it is not. And, well, I did not realise how big that fostering role, the mother role, the psychologist role was. (focus group, student 4)

> In the school system, it is us teachers who have to be the safe adult, who not only teach things like fractional arithmetic and text analysis, but who also can give a smile and show support when things don’t look great. I still have a lot to learn when it comes to things like teaching methods and curriculum content, but, at the same time, I have very much to offer, both with my own experiences, a big smile, passion and, not least, a great deal of empathy. (student reflection 3)

The quotes shed further light on the qualities that the epistemic object of the psychosocial fosters in and requires of teachers, as they (must) become as emotionally open, sensitive, and—ultimately—vulnerable as their pupils. To establish compatibility and gain access to their pupils’ emotional selves, teachers must become attuned to the emotions and affects that define and connect the individuals in the classroom. Accordingly, authenticity is an ideal that teacher educators and student teachers see as a key factor when dealing with the psychosocial school environment. For example, during a lecture on the professional role of the teacher, students were asked to discuss their personal strengths. Caring for pupils was a central theme discussed by a group of students. The students also emphasised that a teacher’s caring should be genuine and authentic. They all agreed that being a teacher was not a role one *acted*, but a profession in which one *really* cared. Another student wrote in their written reflections that as soon as they started to give more of themself, it was easier to feel safe in the role of the teacher. To meet one’s pupils as one’s own true self was perceived as crucial

in mastering the challenges of the psychosocial school environment. Thus, the epistemic object of the psychosocial tends to dissolve itself as an object with concrete and external epistemic content in order to be internalised in the form of authentic experiences of selfhood.

Alongside authenticity, *empathy* emerged as a key virtue that future teachers needed to acquire if they were to act in and upon their psychosocial school environment. This virtue was fostered in teacher education, both explicitly through concrete knowledge and methods, and implicitly through activities such as relationship and community building. The lectures included a variety of learning activities and didactic approaches to this end. The teacher educators were strategic about how they wanted the student teachers to experience a positive environment during their training—an experience that they would be able to bring into their profession after graduation. In addition, the teacher educators themselves sought to be caring role models and wanted their students to experience what it meant to be part of a positive psychosocial environment. This meant building meaningful and caring relationships, engaging in dialogue and debate, giving and receiving empathy, giving supportive feedback, and experiencing and reflecting on a wide range of emotions. Student teachers remain in the same class throughout their training to ensure that this is achieved.

Observations also showed how the epistemic object of the psychosocial became familiar and tangible as it was translated into human relationships and conveyed through emotional narratives of individual suffering and injustice. The student teachers' intimate knowledge of the psychosocial was to a certain degree nurtured by the teacher educators. They were encouraged to engage in close and caring teacher-pupil relationships, because it is only when teachers know their pupils on a personal level that they are able to understand and interpret their behaviour. As a teacher educator made clear in a lecture, a teacher's values, attitudes, and ability to interpret pupil behaviour are central to addressing psychosocial difficulties. The same educator also used videos of children in destructive psychosocial school environments to evoke empathy in the student teachers. Another educator read fictional stories about children who had experienced exclusion and other difficulties at school. It was evident that these methods created an emotional and participatory atmosphere during the lectures and developed empathy and a sense of goodness in the students.

Alongside these more personal and experiential approaches to exploring the realm of emotions, student teachers were also introduced to methods that derive more directly from therapeutic expertise. One example is *mentalisation*. In brief, mentalising is the process of making sense of the subjective states and mental processes of others. It has its roots in psychoanalysis and attachment theory and was initially used as a treatment for borderline personality disorder (Bateman & Fonagy, 2013). Today, it is commonly applied in a wide range of professional settings, including teaching (see, for example, Brandtzæg et al., 2016). In lectures, mentalisation was used to enable students to "see the children from the inside" and to get a true sense of who they were and what they were struggling with.

## *3. Focus on the self*

Another key characteristic of the epistemic object of the psychosocial is the way in which it places the individual at the centre. This was evident in the lectures and in the student teachers' written assignments. Relationship building based on principles of a child-centred orientation and personalised learning was repeatedly emphasised in lectures. The student teachers were taught to recognise the unique individuality of their pupils and to attend to their needs so that they would feel safe and included. For example, one teacher educator repeatedly emphasised in her lectures that disruptive behaviour is an expression of pain and vulnerability, and therefore children who act out should not be labelled as troublemakers or problem children. This teacher educator saw disruptive behaviour as rooted in the psychosocial environment and best addressed through good teacher-pupil relationships.

Although the individual is central, a strong community perspective was also encouraged. "The community is the subject" was a phrase that the teacher educator mentioned above used several times in her lectures, almost as a catchphrase. What she meant by this was that pupils should never be left alone with their problems. Teachers must strive to see the child as a complete being, in addition to their unique environment, in order to make sense of their behaviour in class.

Adapted education is a methodology that was widely addressed and discussed in the lectures. Based on self-centred epistemologies, adapted education was presented as an ideal that aims to provide each pupil with an education that meets his or her specific, unique needs. Such needs were linked to several identity-creating variables, such as cultural and socio-economic background, lived experience, emotional register, and learning difficulties. Moreover, pupils should also be protected from harmful or exclusionary knowledge content and pedagogical methods. To give an example from a lecture: Pupils from a migrant background have different referents than pupils from a majority background. Therefore, as the teacher educator discussed, the dissemination of classic Norwegian children's literature can be harmful, as it can make a group of pupils feel excluded because they do not recognise themselves in these stories to the same extent as majority pupils born and raised in Norway.

The emphasis on the individual-based nature of the psychosocial was also evident when mental health was discussed. For example, in group assignments where students had to summarise the content of the semester, mental health and individual well-being were linked to the issue of "diversity". Diversity was thus seen not only as a social phenomenon related to cultural, ethnic, national, or religious variables, but also as related to the individual's unique mental health.

# Discussion: The psychosocial between compatibility and friction

In the following discussion, we will argue that the psychosocial with its epistemic characteristics presented above—ubiquitous, emotionally-oriented and self-centred—creates both compatibility and friction. Furthermore, the interplay and simultaneity of these moments of compatibility and friction will be considered in relation to specific aspects of therapeutic culture.

According to Knorr Cetina, it is in the nature of epistemic objects that they arouse interest, interpretation, adaptation, and *desire*, when they spill-over into different knowledge communities and social relations. What happens to the desire generated by the psychosocial epistemic object in Norwegian teacher education? In its most theoretical and abstract form, it is difficult to see how the psychosocial can generate a wanting-to-know-more among the student teachers. This is because the psychosocial is often perceived as too complex, and its formalised responsibility therefore generates little curiosity or drive for further theoretical exploration. Instead of creating excitement and desire, it overwhelms and causes friction and discomfort.

However, the desire sparked by the psychosocial does not simply dissolve here. It leaves behind its theoretical and abstract complexities in order to attend to embodied experiences and practices. Because of its close association with emotions, individual experiences, and authentic relationships, the psychosocial taps into human aspects that both student teachers and teacher educators can relate to. When the psychosocial channels desire into the inner workings of the authentic self, a strong ideological foundation for teacher professionalism is created. In particular, both student teachers and teacher educators found the psychosocial's emphasis on emotions and deep personal relationships intuitively meaningful. Here, the psychosocial became compatible with one of the core aspects of the teaching profession, namely care. The caring dimension of the psychosocial is a source of inspiration and pride as it strengthens and actualises the ideological and moral foundation of the teacher. The ubiquitous character of the psychosocial makes sense in this regard, as it places the (caring) teacher at the centre of every aspect of children's well-being.

We are thus dealing with two different modes of the psychosocial and its epistemic content: one that is derived from expert fields and emerges as abstract and complex, and one that is experienced in an intuitive and embodied way. It is the theoretical content of the psychosocial that points to its original formation within expert therapeutic communities (psychology and psychiatry). But its embodied equivalence also illustrates typical characteristics of therapeutic culture. Illouz, who sees therapeutic culture as the most pronounced case of a spill-over effect according to Knorr Cetina, describes both the "intellectualisation [or rationalisation] of intimate bonds" (2007, p. 32), and the "intensification of emotional life" (2008, p. 59) in workplace settings as central therapeutic developments.

The aforementioned rationalisation phenomenon involves managing emotions using neutral methods of expression and communication (Illouz, 2007). This approach seeks to regulate and bring clarity to one's emotions by utilising impartial language. The goal is to promote a sense of control and understanding of one's feelings, leading to improved mental well-being and overall emotional stability. Methods such as mentalisation and affect regulation, which were applied at the teacher education institution, can be seen as therapeutic tools designated to map out, influence and control the psychosocial school environment. In turn, the rationalisation of emotional life implies the implementation of psychological expertise in work environments, leading to "new models of sociability" (Illouz, 2008, 59) based on affect, emotions, and human relations. Even though Illouz's research on the matter stems from economic contexts such as private companies, we also see related forms of emotionalisation in the work and learning environments the teacher educators sought to establish, namely a positive psychosocial environment based on caring relationships, dialogue, empathy, and emotional reflection.

Despite having the therapeutic narrative of individual and emotional well-being at its centre, the epistemic object of the psychosocial seems to create a certain disconnect between its theoretical and embodied dimensions, making it difficult for the student teachers to reconcile and comprehend them as two sides of the same coin. Significant in this regard is the psychosocial's ubiquity, which makes it challenging to identify its specific epistemic content. As the spill-over of therapeutic thought and practice has brought matters of the emotional self into all areas of society, it becomes difficult to distinguish between therapeutic expertise and popular science and culture.

The question of the psychosocial is also important in terms of its potential to replace of teachers' traditional epistemic practice of teaching and conveying knowledge. Moving beyond this traditional educational task, the psychosocial promotes knowledge in the form of abilities, techniques, and methods that enable teachers to care for and connect with each individual pupil and their unique background and emotional self. As the psychosocial blurs the distinction between being a knowledge provider and a mental health practitioner, this created both a sense of being overwhelmed and unrealistic expectations of the student teachers' professional responsibilities.

This tendency can be further described as a move away from objective and universal knowledge, replaced by epistemic premises based on authenticity, experience, and subjectivity. Ultimately, this would result in a relativistic notion of knowledge, which has been widely criticised (Brunila, 2012; Ecclestone, 2011; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019; Irisdotter Aldenmyr & Olson, 2016). According to this view, common knowledge can even be seen as destructive for vulnerable school children, as it can cause or reinforce social exclusion. When solely focusing on the psychosocial perspective, the pupil is portrayed as emotionally fragile, affected, and at risk, thereby undermining their intellectual and learning abilities and curiosity about the world.

## Concluding remarks

What are the characteristics of the psychosocial in Norwegian teacher education when considered as an epistemic object? And how is it conditioned by therapeutic culture? Our aim in this article was to give answers to these questions through a close-up analysis of fieldwork material and its wider discussion in relation to therapeutic culture. In doing so, we derived three key epistemic characteristics of the psychosocial: ubiquity, emotional orientation, and self-focus. Moreover, by applying Knorr Cetina's account of epistemic objects, we described the psychosocial in terms of its structuring agency, its channelling of desire, and its ongoing redefinition of the teacher's professional role. When brought into contact with broader contexts of therapeutic culture, such as the rationalisation of emotions and the implementation of emotion-based methods and phenomena in the workplace, we demonstrated how key characteristics of the psychosocial simultaneously create compatibility and friction. Finally, we reflected whether the psychosocial's therapeutic perspective on knowledge might imply a devaluation of knowledge itself.

Concepts and ideas derived from the field of therapy typically offer solutions to the various barriers to mental health and well-being that individuals face today. These issues have also been integrated into education and the professional responsibilities of teachers. These ideas are so ingrained in our modern culture that we tend to take them for granted. However, there is growing critical concerns about the influence and implications of emotion-oriented epistemologies in education. Our aim in this article was to contribute to this discussion by tracing the psychosocial in teacher education, highlighting its epistemic characteristics and its potential impact on teachers' professionalism. We believe that more research is needed on the ways in which therapeutic culture influences the teaching profession. It is also important to explore the relationship between subjective-emotional experience and shared objective values, and between psychological introspection and political awareness, and to shed light on how notions of pupil vulnerability and risk shape the professional mandate of teachers today.

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