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## **Legitimizing collaboration, collaborating to legitimate:**

### **Justification work in “holistic” services for long-term unemployed persons**

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#### **Abstract**

To address complex social problems, such as long-term unemployment, local authorities in many countries are developing “holistic” or “integrated” services, where multiple actors and professions collaborate with a view to better meet the needs of the individual citizen. By breaking with existing practices and regulations, collaborative services must be legitimized in new ways so as to appear acceptable not only in the eyes of the public and politicians, but also to caseworkers and the long-term unemployed persons. This article examines the multifarious and sometimes neglected efforts to make these collaborative services legitimate in the eyes of this plurality of stakeholders on multiple levels of governance. Our study indicates three distinct but mutually interrelated spheres of audience that require partly conflicting justification work. We also find that the narrow pursuit of justification work to ensure legitimacy with one audience may potentially jeopardize the justification work in the other two.

**Keywords:** collaborative governance, legitimacy, justification, long-term unemployment, Denmark

## Introduction

The group of socially excluded citizens facing multiple problems related to health, disability, long-term unemployment, family life, substance abuse and/or finance constitutes a persistent and difficult challenge in most societies. While this challenge is by no means new, it has increasingly been problematized politically since the 1980s as a matter of (long-term) labor market inactivity.

Inclusion is a function of labor market participation and therefore contains both the end and means to counter social exclusion. Most OECD countries have responded by introducing active social policies, active labor market policies or, simply, activation policies aiming to reintegrate the unemployed citizen via a composite mix of instruments and logics that varies from country to country (Bonoli 2013; Hansen 2019; Lindsay et al., 2007).

Within a context of activation policies and NPM, numerous public employment services (PES) are currently experimenting with more “integrated” and “holistic” collaborations across disciplines and sectors to tackle the social exclusion problem (Considine et al. 2015; Crawford 2012; Fuertes et al. 2014; Heidenreich and Rice 2016; Lindsay and Dutton 2012; Newman et al., 2004). A small but growing body of literature focuses on the many challenges involved in the implementation of social services at the street-level, such as knowledge-sharing (Andersen et al., 2017) and the often ambiguous role of the client in collaborative service production processes (Andersen 2019; Lundberg 2018; Meriluoto 2018). However, an important but largely neglected issue is *legitimacy*. This limited attention is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the aim of such collaborations is often precisely to increase legitimacy by including relevant stakeholders (Askim et al. 2011). While this may be the outcome, it also increases the contestability by engaging actors spanning across professional norms, public and private sectors, service providers and recipients. Second,

contestability is further increased when collaborative services break with existing practices and regulations as well as professional norms and ideas. This break makes the consent and support from the employees involved a challenging prerequisite for successful implementation (Lægreid and Rykkja 2014; Zetterberg et al., 2016). Consequently, legitimacy must be established, reproduced, and assembled with existing institutions and practices.

The literature on collaborative or network governance usually addresses legitimacy in a normative and deductive manner, as various principles to assess the degree of legitimacy of a collaboration or network (Hansen and Triantafillou 2020; Netelenbos 2020). Some have argued that the legitimacy of collaborations should ultimately emanate from the electoral laws and procedures institutionalizing the election of executive power ruling in the interest of the people of a state territory (van Buuren et al., 2012; Papadopoulos 2007; Skelcher and Sullivan 2007), whereas others reason that legitimacy should be attributed to the involved stakeholders; that is, to a series of actions that would appear subjectively acceptable in the eyes of those with a more or less direct relation to the activities of the organization (Bryson et al., 2006; Human and Provan 2000; Stevens and Verhoest 2016). Such normative and deductive approaches have at least three limitations. First, assessing the degree of legitimacy tends to lead to a rather static view on collaborative networks. While the informal nature of legitimacy is recognized, for instance by pointing to the importance of mutual trust (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015) and social learning (Lundmark et al., 2014), the assessment of such factors is reduced to throughput indicators that neglect the dynamic and changeable nature of legitimacy. Second, it risks turning the problem or crisis of legitimacy into a mainly theoretical issue that can be solved deductively by investigating the extent to which reality complies with theory (Netelenbos 2020). The consequence of both limitations is that, in the Weberian sense, the empirical matter of “how legitimacy is done in practice” is neglected (Ibid.).

Third, the bracketing of legitimacy into sub-categories bears the risk of overlooking the interdependencies of such categories.

Rather than assessing the legitimacy of a collaboration, we ask: What is going on when actors try to legitimize the collaborations in which they are engaged? Instead of assessing the work based on pre-given norms, the aim is to examine how these services are rendered legitimate or illegitimate to the actors involved in the collaboration. The present article seeks to shed light on this issue by investigating the following question: What kind of work (i.e., practices, processes, and disputes) is involved in legitimizing collaborative service delivery? Thus, by invoking the “justification work” concept (Jagd 2011; Oldenhof et al. 2014), we take an inductive explorative approach, focusing on *legitimation* rather than legitimacy. This question is examined by focusing on the design and delivery of holistic services to the long-term unemployed recipients of social assistance in a Danish municipality. In so doing, we can shed light on the dynamic, multifarious, and often fragile and informal character of legitimacy in collaborations.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: After presenting the study’s analytical framework and method, we briefly present the case of the Cohesive Citizen’s Plan (CCP). This is followed by analyses of justification work in three spheres with distinct audiences: 1) externally, to actors outside of the municipality and the public, 2) internally, within the municipal organization, and 3) at the front-level sphere, between municipality and client. Finally, we discuss the findings and present a conclusion.

## **Justification work**

There are at least two principal approaches when analyzing the legitimacy of a certain action: A deductive approach, whereby the action is assessed in terms of a pre-given normative standard, and an inductive approach, whereby the action is assessed in terms of the views of the persons and organizations involved in the actions to be assessed. This article adopts the latter approach. It does so because we assume that several, vastly different norms of legitimacy are at stake in collaborative processes. Rather than scrutinizing the extent to which the actions comply with these various norms, our interest is in better understanding how competent actors reflect on and negotiate them when trying to justify their actions. In contrast to Weber's and not least Easton's understanding of legitimacy as the acceptance of the ruler of a given political system by those who are ruled, our understanding of legitimacy closely mirrors Mark Suchman's definition:

*“Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions”* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

This definition, which is inspired by sociological institutionalism, clears a space for analyzing the multifarious work that an organization must undertake to secure the legitimacy not so much of the people that it rules, but more the stakeholders that it serves or depend upon to pursue its goals, be that economic or political ones. Although Suchman's definition focused on the organisation's legitimacy, we believe that the definition is viable for the collaboration as well, with the qualification that we may expect the stakeholders of a network to be even more diverse than those of a specific organization.

This empirical conception of legitimacy has informed several interesting studies in public administration (Olsen 2006; Rothstein 2012), some of which point explicitly to the practices and processes through which legitimacy is created in and by public organizations (Gordon et al., 2009). While there is an extensive literature developing and applying legitimacy standards for collaborative governance, there is remarkably little work based on an empirical, non-prescriptive conception of legitimacy that seeks to understand how legitimacy is produced under conditions of collaborative governance within states (Netelenbos 2020).

We use the notion of collaborative service to denote the more or less systematic practices whereby legally and administratively discrete public agencies collaborate across agency divisions to provide services that are better tailored to the needs of the individual citizen than would have been possible without such collaboration. The existing literature points to crucial commonalities regarding the need to support legitimacy in the eyes of the stakeholders be they public or private (Vangen et al., 2015). For instance, in a comprehensive interorganizational study of collaboration in the US, Silvia concludes that the effectiveness of such collaborations hinge on their ability to create ‘legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders, including those within the network members' home agencies, those who are the recipients of the services delivered by the network, and the network members themselves’ (Silvia, 2011, p. 69).

In order to partially fill the gap in our knowledge about how legitimacy is produced in and by collaborative governance, we build on the concept of “justification work” (Jagd 2011; Oldenhof et al. 2014). This concept is heavily inspired by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot’s seminal work, *On Justification*, in which they developed a framework for studying everyday situations involving



disputes (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Boltanski and Thévenot show how such situations can be understood as *tests* in which actors engage in justification and critique to achieve some kind of consent. On the one hand, justification and critique is a linguistic matter, where different generalizable moral principles of value, worth and justice are mobilized. On the other hand, justification also entails a “confrontation with reality—the test—in which, by seeking recourse to devices of both a material and cognitive nature, and which are often institutionalized in one way or the other, the claims made can be verified in terms of their foundation” (Blokker, 2011, p. 253).

As Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters (2014) argue, the framework is useful for understanding how public organizations manage value conflicts through justification work by establishing compromises through rhetoric as well as through institutions and material objects. By approaching organizations as “heterarchies” (Stark 2009) with a plurality of conflicting norms and evaluative principles, Boltanski and Thévenot point out the importance of *compromises* that mitigate the tensions between them, thereby enabling coordination between the involved actors (Oldenhof et al. 2014). Here, compromises are not simply a balancing of interests; rather, they designate how two or more evaluative principles are rendered compatible by establishing “composite” arrangements that assuage the tensions between them (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). These arrangements can be formal, such as a performance measurement scheme with a set of indicators that are weighed against each other, or, as we will see later, more informal, such as the gradual establishment of a plan for a citizen in collaboration with a social worker, mitigating individual dreams and the resources and rules of the municipality. We characterize the multifarious efforts to establish such compromises in situations with value tensions as “justification work” (see also Oldenhof et al. 2014, p. 55).

Our analytical framework builds on the above theoretical insights and develops them further. Existing studies using the framework tend to focus either on *internal* organizational justification work (Cloutier and Langley 2017), often with a focus on the role of managers (Oldenhof et al. 2014; Pernkopf-Konhaeusner and Brandl 2010) or on *public* disputes of justification and critique (Carstensen and Hansen 2019; Hansen, 2019; Holden and Scerri 2015; Patriotta et al. 2011). We take a more comprehensive analytical perspective in at least three ways. First, we include both the external justification work outwards of the municipal organization as well as internally within the organization. We do so because the legitimacy of the initiative appears fragile, and therefore possibly in need of justification in both spheres and because it allows us to understand how the compromises established in both spheres are interdependent, often in tension-filled ways, rather than simply “decoupled” (Meyer and Rowan 1991). Second, we include the justification work toward the client(s) involved in the initiative. Given that a key rationale of the holistic service is getting the citizen closer to the job market by improving their wellbeing and empowering them, we find it relevant to analyze the justification work entailed by including the client in collaborative processes. Third, we analyze the informal dimension of justification work, which appears to be crucial to justifying the services in the eyes of both caseworkers and clients.

## **Methods**

The present study is a single case study of the ongoing attempts in Denmark to expand the use of collaborative governance in social service delivery. We chose services catering to long-term unemployed persons who often suffer from a wide range of other problems than lacking a job

because the resolution of this problem is often regarded as very difficult and increasingly as something that calls for collaboration. While the employment services in Denmark are provided at the municipal level, the area is strongly regulated, controlled and monitored by the Ministry of Employment, the emphasis of which is above all on rapid job placement, though skills development also play a certain role. Moreover, the possibility of providing cross-sectoral provision of services catering to unemployed persons with other problems than the lack of a job is heavily impeded by several discrete laws and regulations, e.g., the health law, the social service law and the unemployment insurance law.

### *The case*

This study of collaboration around long-term unemployment services focuses on the municipality of Furesø, a municipality of around 41,000 inhabitants located 20 km northwest of Copenhagen. Together with eight other municipalities in the same region, Furesø applied to enlist in the free municipalities experiment (DOC#16) in the network “One plan for cohesive action with the citizen” (OPCAC). The national “free municipalities experiments” were initiated in 2011 to encourage municipalities to test de-bureaucratization initiatives by granting temporary exemptions from some of the existing regulations.

The aim of Furesø’s CCP initiative launched in 2016 was to increase education levels or to get citizens into some sort of employment, reduce their hospitalization, and/or lower the administrative costs of employment services (DOC#14). To achieve these goals, CCP works to strengthen collaboration, firstly, within the various administrations involved in services targeting citizens with complex problems (e.g., long-term unemployment, physical and mental health, substance abuse problems, parenting) and, secondly, between municipality and citizen. Citizens with complex

problems are normally handled by several separate administrations within and outside of the municipality, each of which are based in own their legal codes as well as administrative and professional logics without much, if any, coordination between them. CCP aims to strengthen collaboration mainly by means of three instruments: one coherent, individualized citizen action plan covering all activities, a team of cross-sector case workers, and so-called “network meetings” between the citizen and all of the professional parties involved in the life of the citizen. This sometimes entails 12–14 actors, many of whom the citizen has never met before the meeting (INT#4).

The CCP operates with two roles that are unique to the collaboration. The “coordinating caseworker” coordinates the documentation and orchestration of actions across sectors within (job center, social and health areas) and outside of the municipality (e.g., businesses, psychiatry) (DOC#8). She is responsible for the cross-sector collaboration for ensuring the legality of the actions taken. The second role is the so-called “citizen consultant.” Whereas the “coordinating caseworker” represents the administration, the “citizen consultant” works closely together with the citizen to estimate and revise the need for support goals and actions set in the plan and to prepare for the network meetings (INT#2).

### ***Data***

In order to substantiate the validity of our study, we explicate the link between the analytical approach and the theoretical framework (Ashworth, McDermott, and Currie 2019). . We conducted 11 interviews with essential personnel inside and outside of the collaboration, including politicians, managers, and case-workers. We selected interviewees with an active role in the CCP and actors who had either a political or managerial responsibility for the CCP. Conversely, because of resource

limitations, we did not interview persons who ideally could have played a role in the collaboration, but for various reasons did not do so. The full list of interviewees is available in Appendix 1. This allowed us to gather and cross-check information on the various aspects of the collaboration both in- and outside of the CCP. The interviews were conducted over more than a one-year period: the first nine interviews in 2019 (roughly half-way through the project), and the last two interviews took place in 2020, at the completion of the project. This relatively long period gave us the opportunity to follow key developments in the implementation process of the CCP.

The interviews were used to gather information about the CCP, its origins, the management, etc. They lasted approximately one hour each and took place either in the municipality or online.. The interviews were conducted by either one or two of the authors based on a semi-structured interview guide consisting of several main questions to guide the conversation. We used probing to follow up on new points and information from the interviewees. The interview guide included the following main themes: Their role inside or outside the collaboration, the collaboration within either the CCP or the network of free municipalities, and evaluation of the project.

The study also relies on document analysis. The collection of documents took place in two ways. Firstly, we conducted a systematic search for public documents using Infomedia, a Danish media database. This was done to extract statements about the CCP from the political system, involved actors, etc. in national and local media. We also searched for official documents about the CCP and studied the minutes of municipal council meetings and other committees concerned with the CCP on the web. Secondly, at the end of each interview with the municipal employees, we asked for further documentation, reports etc. on the CCP. We extracted 17 documents in total with information on the CCP collaborative process (e.g., internal policy documents and presentations,

press releases, contracts, city council meetings, and external evaluations). The full list of documents is available in Appendix 2.

We used our theoretical framework to examine and code the documents and interviews for different forms of justification and for compromises between them. When coding the material, we thus asked what kinds of values (why?) were used to justify and in what formats (how?) such justifications were institutionalized. One way of categorizing the material could be to use the Boltanski and Thévenot's model of six 'orders of worth' (market, civic, domestic, fame, industrial and inspiration) (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006) that has proven useful to semantic analyses of disputes (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio 2016). However, we found the orders of worth not to adequately capture the justifications, values and tensions at stake in the data. Thus, following Heuts and Mol (2013) and Hansen (2019) we chose to approach the data more inductively aiming to tease out the key justifications that actors mobilized.

Here, a thematic coding based on King (2004) was suitable. Through this coding, we were, first, able to categorize the material with regards to the direction of justification work, i.e. three spheres (1) externally, to actors outside of the municipality and the public, 2) internally, within the municipal organization, and 3) at the front-level sphere, between municipality and client). Secondly, we teased out intense justification work around two distinct disputed issues (cost/employment vs. wellbeing/empowerment throughout the three spheres of justification. Passages from the documents were extracted based on the codes deriving from the analysis of the interviews.

The study has at least two limitations. First, our study does not include interviews with actors who ideally probably should have participated in the collaboration, such as local businesses, other

municipal centers and the regional psychiatry sector, but for various reasons did not do so. Second, our study does not include interviews with the unemployed citizens targeted by the new collaborative services. Inclusion of interviews with these actor groups could have improved our understanding of some of the problems experienced with garnering support to the new collaborative service.

### **External justification work**

In the following, we present the justification work in the three different spheres. We begin with the justification directed toward external actors outside of the municipal administration, we then turn to the internal justification work, and finally to the justification located in the administration–citizen encounters.

External justification work contains different formats as well as justifications in which politicians, managers, and case-workers are all involved. The justifications value different elements of the CCP that are not always easily compatible. The first format building on a distinct moral justification highlights the *citizen empowerment* and *the improved wellbeing*. This format occurs mostly through narratives of positive achievements and outcomes for the individual citizens involved. For instance, on the official website, the municipality has published a video explaining the CCP work and services. The video concludes with the following quote: “I got my life back thanks to the three people I met on my way (the coordinating caseworker, citizen consultant, and company consultant). It has been amazing” (DOC#3). Highlighting the positive effects for the citizens in terms of improved wellbeing and empowerment is a way of justifying the money and resources invested in

the CCP. The citizens' wellbeing is also important for politicians' justifications to the public. The mayor (representing the Social Democrats), for instance, released a press release announcing the impact of the CCP mid-term:

“The efforts with one plan and the cohesive citizen plan are some of the things I'm most proud of as mayor. On a daily basis, we work across centers and disciplines to offer our citizens the best possible services. The citizens who experience this lift are often dealing with complex issues and have therefore previously been sent back and forth between our departments. We can do better than that! And we've already succeeded. And it's amazing that the ambitions behind the cohesive citizen plan and our work in OPCAC will have an impact on the legal framework.” (DOC#3)

The sharing of narratives is the justification strategy of the local government administration targeting the local politicians. The city manager of the municipality then deliberately uses it to feed them with success stories that they can use when promoting and explaining the project elsewhere (INT#9). The politicians seem to have accepted this strategy and continue the external justification work; for instance, the Employment and Business Committee chairman describes his own work and efforts as a politician through these success stories (INT#6)

Finally, this narrative of wellbeing is also propagated in the external evaluations from The Danish Center for Social Science Research (VIVE). The final report primarily includes, mostly, positive stories from individual citizens' experiences focusing on “soft” measures of wellbeing and more trust-based relation with the municipality rather than employment (DOC#6).



This brings us to the second prominent justification of CCP: *cutting costs and increasing employment*. As mentioned above, the focus on employment was a prerequisite for joining the OPCAC. Accordingly, the CCP was justified from the outset by the performance of quantitative employment measures (DOC#2) and through the latest press release from the municipality, commenting on the final evaluation of OPCAC. The evaluation states that 86 out of 146 of the municipality's citizens with the most complex social problems have progressed out of the system: 40 are now employed or have started an education, and the rest have been granted early retirement or received clarification in another way (DOC#4). The cost-savings justification is obviously not unique. Yet, it has been particularly important to local politicians and public managers in Furesø Municipality, which was established as a merger between two municipalities with severe economic difficulties (INT#9). Further, it is seen as a response to issues related to the precursor of CCP: the Future of the Family project. During the final evaluation in the city council, the Liberals (*Venstre*), in opposition in the municipal council, criticized that the budget was being exceeded compared to the achieved results (DOC#12) putting pressure to the CCP to be able to deliver and document "measurable results" (INT#10).

Two justifications then are present in the external justifications of CCP and OPCAC, namely: citizen empowerment and the improved wellbeing and cutting costs and increasing employment. When approached separately, the two justifications seem to be complementary and co-exist rather peacefully. However, OPCAC in fact entailed a critique of cost/employment being too predominant in the municipal approach towards its unemployed citizens thereby inhibiting a cohesive empowering effort. For instance, the legal exemptions granted were exemptions to the activation requirements in the employment law such as mandatory meetings and enrolment in activation schemes. Whereas the justification of empowerment and wellbeing was clearly predominant in the

external evaluation and justification toward the (local and national) public, the actual institutional compromise steering the CCP was a different story.

### **Internal justification work**

The interviews make clear that the methodology and organizational design of the CCP broke radically with established routines and procedures. Therefore, ensuring support for the CCP within the municipal administration required substantial justification work. Some municipal employees saw the CCP as a welcome change, other found it confusing and problematic. The ensuing justification work was both a downwards matter, from management to employees in the various administrative bodies within the municipality, and a sideways matter from the dedicated employees partaking in the CCP towards other employees together with actors outside of the municipality (companies, psychiatry, hospitals). The work within the CCP and the methodology used were explained and justified in multiple townhall gatherings, morning meetings, etc. (INT#5) and through employee training (INT#9). In the presentation of the CCP, the same justifications and much of the same material (e.g., the videos) are reproduced, while more emphasis is placed on the need for “common professional culture” and “transversal management” (DOC#17). Further, what may appear as external justification work (e.g., the videos), in fact also function as internal justification.

The justification work in the internal sphere revolves around the moral and practical question of whether the attempts to enhance the citizens’ employability also contributes to their empowerment and wellbeing. Some of the interviewees found that they are complementary and, therefore, that the

new approach is readily justifiable. Many within the CCP team justify the project with reference to the increase in the wellbeing of the individual citizen after transitioning into employment. As one company consultant explains:

“Because all research shows that the activity, the employment part, it has a positive effect on the treatment part. (...) It isn’t just unemployment benefits from the municipality. Now it also about the citizen being able to earn a wage, and that has an incredibly positive effect and is very healing. Because you’re able to do something.”  
(INT#8)

The same win–win argument was made in relation to cutting costs (INT#9).

However, the balance between cost/employability and wellbeing/empowerment is often problematized by other municipal employees. For instance, a CCP team member argues that cutting costs is in fact the predominant objective. “But we’ve also had to cut costs. It’s never something people actually say—but that’s the aim of the exercise” (INT#10). The focus on employment and, as a consequence, anchoring of the CCP in the employment administration, also created tension and conflict between the CCP team and other caseworkers and teams from other departments and sectors in the municipality. “My interpretation is that our collaborators arrived with a narrative of this being an employment project, while in fact we have to—and want to—make it a cross-sector project” (INT#7).

While the justification work trying to align employment with wellbeing has convinced some employees, others find the focus on employment to be irreconcilable with their professional ethos

and have even quit their job for this reason (INT#1). Thus, the CCP has not yet been fully institutionalized within all of the involved sectors in the municipality concerning the employment, social, and health areas. The fragility of this compromise has become more evident in the final year of the CCP project. Following several changes in the top-level management, which meant that the managers who had been deeply engaged in the design and launching of the CCP left, the managerial commitment and devotion to the project has faded (INT#10,11).

The place in which the tension between cost/employability and wellbeing/empowerment is manifested most clearly is in the quantitative measuring of the CCP. As mentioned, there was a political pressure to be able to justify the CCP through measurable results. While the job center was used to comply with such demands in their employment targets, well-being and empowerment proved to be much harder to measure in quantitative indicators (INT#5). Thus, internally, the CCP was measured according to the goal of getting at least 80% of the new citizens into employment, education, training, etc. (DOC#15) with an increasing focus the number of internships processed (INT#10). Initially, this meant that citizens with little employability were excluded from the target group. However, at a later stage quantitative indicators jeopardized the compromise between well-being and employment in the CCP:

“We’re measured on the number of internships. We believe, however, that our most important task when dealing with the most vulnerable citizen groups is to find the right match—not the fastest match.” (INT#10)

The conflict between quantified performance measuring and the attempt to create qualitative improvements in the lives of the citizens has had very practical effects by downgrading or

neglecting the elements related to the justification of empowerment and wellbeing. The CCP team has been reduced, leaving only one coordinating caseworker who has been with the project since the beginning. She accounts for the changes like this: “I miss some creativity and inspiration. Thinking outside of the box. I don’t experience that the same way anymore. Not at all” (INT#10). The CCP caseworkers must now deal with 40 cases each (instead of 30); the ten citizen cases added to the portfolio are dealt with in the traditional style with only the job center attending to the casework. These changes have limited the use of network meetings and cross-sector collaboration, thus curtailing the earlier holistic approach (INT#10,11).

In sum, the municipal top management has gone at great length in developing new instruments to drum up internal support from the various municipal agencies involved in the new services. However, the justificatory power emanating from the NPM inspired output measurement turned out to overrule the justification work around the collaborative service approach emphasizing both the citizens’ employment *and* their wellbeing. This gradual erosion of the CCP’s collaborative mode of service provision was not least due to turnover of the managerial staff in charge of the collaborative project. Apart from the contingent event of managerial turnover, the dwindling support for the holistic service approach also seems to indicate that it is very difficult to arrive at a compromise between the two distinct sources of justification, i.e., the NPM-inspired quantitative output measuring and the collaborative governance inspired qualitative assessments.

### **Justification work at the front-level**

We now turn to the third sphere of justification taking place in the relationship between the citizen and the caseworkers. Like the justification work in the two other spheres, the tension between employment and wellbeing plays a fundamental role in the work to legitimize the services in the eyes of the citizen. The citizen consultants and company consultants agree that CCP must empower the citizen and that this requires that their interests and desires be taken seriously in the citizen plan. Yet, according to the consultants, the municipality's view of employment or, at least, enhanced employability as the key road to empowerment often conflicts with the citizens' immediate interests and needs. Therefore, the municipal front level employees engage in extensive work to allow for compromises between these two concerns.

The municipal front-level workers are engaged in two types of justification work to secure the legitimacy of the services in the eyes of the citizen, namely cross-organizational alignment, and agreement with the citizen. Cross-organizational alignment aims to ensure that all the involved actors are adhering to the plan and that the plan continues to be based on the citizen's needs and voice. Here, the collaborative format and tools serves to legitimize the joint plan. This plays out in the network meetings, where all involved caseworkers and professionals meet with the citizen, but presumes close collaboration between the citizen, citizen consultant, and the coordinating CCP caseworker. In preparing the first "network meeting," the coordinating caseworker collaborates closely with the citizen consultant and the citizen through tripartite meetings (INT#2,8). In parallel, the coordinating caseworker holds so-called "plan meetings" with other involved case-workers within the municipality to align perspectives and ensure that the citizen plan will be feasible (INT#3,7). The coordinating caseworker then invites all of the relevant actors (e.g., caseworker from the health sector, company consultant, mentor, guest from the psychiatry sector) to the

meeting held at the municipality. The network meeting is aimed at forming or discussing how the goals in the “citizen’s plan” are progressing (DOC#8).

During a typical network meeting, everyone around the table gets to say what is important from their perspective on the citizen’s plan. It might not always be clear for everyone what is going on in different areas of the citizen’s plan or why they were called to attend the meeting. Therefore, it is key that the coordinating caseworker clarifies the aim of the network meeting and explicates the precise roles and expectations of the participating actors (INT#3).

The second type of justification work entails close dialogue between the front-level worker and the citizen. This serves two reciprocal purposes. First, it legitimizes the idea of a collaborative and cohesive effort towards the citizen. The keyword here mentioned over and over again by the front-level workers is trust. The company consultant explains:

“For me, it’s all about creating trust. The dear citizens must have trust in me, that’s the main thing. That they have trust in the fact that I’ll do what’s necessary for them. And they have to be able to say if there’s anything.” (INT#8)

Trust is maintained by insisting on regular contact and communication, and it requires that you “use yourself as a person in the work” (INT#3). Trust-building between the citizen consultant and citizen is often a relatively simple matter of explaining the rules and procedures of the system to the citizen (INT#8). However, the justification work during this dialogue between the municipal caseworkers and the citizen is also complicated by the fact that many citizens involved regard the municipality with suspicion. It seems that the citizen’s trust in the front-level worker is immanently challenged

because of the inequal power relation between the municipality and the citizen. At least, one of the CCP members frankly explains, “there will always be an element of lack of trust, because we basically can come and decide what happens. So that will probably never really go away” (INT#7).

For example, a citizen consultant explains that:

“These citizens are often very ‘allergic’ to the municipality or have mistrust in the municipality, which can go back generations. An often-hidden ingredient in long-term unemployment is that you come from a family marked by long-term unemployment. And you’re afraid of other things, like ‘they’ll take my kids’.” (INT#2)

Second, the close dialogue serves the purpose of enabling the citizen to express her needs and formulate and justify her wishes, for instance at the network meetings. The citizen consultant describes her role as a “midwife”, preparing the citizen for ”giving birth” at the network meetings (INT#8).

When you are together with someone who can decide over your life, you are not always able to hear what they say. I mean, it is not to make the citizen more dependent. In fact it is to enable the citizen to be the *lead*. (INT#8)

This “midwife” work presumes that the citizen feels free to express their concerns, for instance when the plan fails. In such situation, both the coordinating caseworker and the citizen consultant is confronted with finding a delicate balance understanding of the citizen’s point of view while also clarifying the municipality’s expectations and requirements (INT#3,8).



In brief, the municipal front-level workers are engaged extensively in two types of work to secure the legitimacy of the services at the front-level, namely cross-organizational alignment and by close dialogue with the citizen. Both these forms of justification work largely coalesce around the attempt to make compromises between the conflict-ridden quest for citizen employment and citizen empowerment well-being. These compromises are not well institutionalized but remain fragile and the subject of regular contestation.

## **Conclusion**

This article has analyzed the variety of justification work conducted around and within a collaborative initiative to provide holistic services for long-term unemployed citizens in a Danish municipality. We asked *how* this initiative is legitimized by *what* means in order to cast light on the dynamic, multifarious, and often fragile and informal character of legitimacy in collaborations. This justification work not only takes place on several levels but also in several formats; from “classic” legitimation toward the public and in the municipal council to deep (and often highly informal) collaborative engagements between different professions engaged in the casework, and between caseworkers and citizens. It also varies from quantitative indicators and budgeting to qualitative and narrative accounts. Although some are clearly more visible from the outside than others, the analysis shows the importance of *all* these formats.

At a methodological level, the paper points out the importance of studying the *ongoing* justification work aimed at maintaining legitimacy. This empirical approach focusing on the actual work of justification allowed us to grasp the fragile legitimacy of collaborations around the handling of a complex social problem. In the studied case, this fragility is expressed by the tension in the

collaboration with certain existing regulations and criteria of legitimacy and by the public managers' waning commitment to the justification work becoming less intensive and committed.

Our study provides three contributions. Firstly, on a substantive level, our study revealed that the justification work evolved around *distinct and partially contradictory values* involved in tackling a complex social problem, such as the activation of the long-term unemployed. Two issues turned out to be particularly salient: employment vs. wellbeing and quantitative performance measuring vs. qualitative improvement of citizen lives. It seems the performance indicators applied to measure the progress of the CCP were increasingly used to justify cutting costs and getting people into employment as quickly as possible. The study thus contributes to the growing literature on the micro-politics of numbers and performance measurement showing how certain evaluative formats may be biased toward certain justifications and values rather than others (Bevan and Hood 2006; Radnor 2008; Triantafillou 2011).

Secondly, on a procedural level, the article suggests that the justification work is predicated on several *instruments to handle conflicts* over values and institutionalize compromises between these. Thus, public managers, case-workers and citizens engaged intensely in network meetings, tripartite meetings, and plan meetings. We found that the justification work taking place through these instruments displaced the balance of the compromise between the values and objectives, leading to a paradoxical situation of high external legitimacy but fragile legitimacy within the organization. Rather than treating these situations cynically as “decoupling” (Meyer and Rowan 1991) or “hypocrisy” (Brunsson 1989), we encourage taking these justification efforts more seriously while paying attention to the many tensions (and occasional contradictions) in these efforts. Another type of ongoing justification work identified in the study was the vast and largely informal efforts by the

CCP members to ensure consent and commitment from their fellow employees in the municipality. Our study thus concurs with existing research, emphasizing the need to build relationships and trust through in-person engagement (Ansell and Gash 2007; Mosley and Wong 2021).

Thirdly and finally, at a sectoral level, our study points to the need to consider how such collaborations are *legitimized in different “spheres”* and how these spheres influence each other. While classic organization scholars theorized the effects of external pressures on legitimation (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Suchman 1995), collaborative network scholars have pointed out the need to understand the internal dimensions of legitimacy (Bryson et al., 2006; Provan et al., 2008; Mosley and Wong, 2021). As mentioned, our study concurs with this latter stream of research but contributes to it by showing the interdependencies and tensions between various spheres of legitimation. In contrast to the rather positive Schillemans and Bovens (2011) assessment of multiple accountabilities, our study suggests that the narrow pursuit of account-giving (aimed at creating legitimacy) in one sphere may potentially undermine the justification work in the other two. On a more speculative note, our case study seems to suggest that the development and survival of the collaborative services are particularly dependent on the justification formats produced at and disseminated from the external level. More precisely, if local politicians are not very explicit about their support to the new way of justifying service delivery and fails to communicate this support to both the external sphere *and* the internal sphere, then public managers and, by implication, caseworkers are likely to revert to the predominant justification regime focusing narrowly on job placement rather than on citizen well-being and empowerment.

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