Preface

Ever since I did my first six months of fieldwork as a graduate student in an activation programme for unemployed citizens (Mik-Meyer 1999), I have been quite puzzled by the progression of the encounter between citizens and welfare workers. This puzzlement has been further strengthened by my subsequent doctoral research project on rehabilitation work (Mik-Meyer 2004), my post doc research on the situations of overweight people (Mik-Meyer 2010b, 2014, 2015b) and recent projects on functional disorders (Mik-Meyer and Johansen 2009; Mik-Meyer 2010a, 2011; Mik-Meyer and Obting 2012) and disability, marginalisation and work (Mik-Meyer 2015a, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). What has puzzled me the most is the often contradictory norms of what welfare work is (or ought to be) when observing and interviewing citizens and the staff whom they encounter. I have found simultaneous and overlapping expectations of standardised documentation, emphasis on legislation as well as co-production, empowerment, choice-making, service delivery, care giving and receiving, as well as many other ideas, norms and principles which stem from greatly different norm-systems, such as the ideal-type bureaucracy, the market and psychology. However, when going through the vast amount of research that examines the encounter between citizens and welfare workers, there seems to be two branches of overlapping research traditions, which rarely intertwine despite their objectives of study (the welfare encounter) being similar.

While writing this book, I have had a pile of literature for each of these research traditions sitting on my desk, literature that respectively centres the analysis of how bureaucratic principles affect the welfare encounter and how values stemming from a market context, standards of New Public Management (NPM) and norms from psychology influence the encounter. However, after going through many of these studies I am left with the impression that the focus of much of this research primarily reflects scholarly traditions and fails to adequately take into account the

complexities of the empirical world. Political scientists seem to prefer the Weberian-inspired literature on the bureaucracy, for instance, the work of Michael Lipsky, whereas sociologists and anthropologists seem to prefer a critical Foucauldian-inspired approach that investigates the effects of market values, NPM and norms from psychology on the welfare encounter. Nevertheless, welfare workers and citizens adhere in reality to a wide range of norms and principles stemming from the bureaucracy, as well as the market and psychology, which is why an important goal of this book has been to engage with both branches of literature. By doing so, it is possible to produce analyses that explain what goes on in real-life welfare encounters. The applied theories and concepts of researchers have profound effects on what can be perceived, and they consequently affect the results of the analyses. If one applies a bureaucratic Lipsky-inspired approach, the result is then likely to be convincing analyses of discretionary practices. Similarly, if one applies Foucauldian conceptualisations, one will get convincing analyses of the subtle workings of power, which leaves very little room for the agency of welfare workers and citizens alike.

Having a background within anthropology and consequently favouring the analysis of the empirical world while simultaneously being a sociologist who is greatly inspired by a constructionist approach that acknowledges the role of theories and theoretical concepts for any analysis, I wish to apply both research traditions, and in doing so bridge two academic approaches which are rarely combined. I do so because it is my conviction, based on my own empirical studies and the reading of much research by my colleagues, that welfare encounters display principles of bureaucracy as well as values of the market, NPM and norms from psychology. By combining these two research traditions, my hope is to produce more convincing analyses than if each of these traditions were applied on their own. I will let the readers decide whether my endeavour has been successful.

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