
RESEARCH

Transnational Welfare Management: Accommodating Transnational Living in Norway

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More than ever, people's living practices span national borders. As a growing group of individuals becomes tied to more than one welfare system, the lack of mechanisms to cater to cross-border migration produces frictions between national welfare provision and transnational clients. To accommodate transnational dynamics, national welfare systems adapt. This article sheds light on the Norwegian experience of this. It explores how the Norwegian social security organisation NAV and the bureaucrats who work there are challenged by and respond to an increasingly transnational population. It presents a framework for research on the transnational work of national welfare organisations' and uses it to analyse micro-, meso- and macro-scale processes of adaptation. The analysis finds that transnational living long has been accommodated through bureaucratic specialisation and entrepreneurship, whereas a current organisational turnaround responds by injecting transnational dynamics into the national mainstream.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Migration; Welfare state; Social security; Governance; Bureaucrats

Introduction

Nationally oriented welfare systems have been rattled by globalisation. Once created to secure the wellbeing of sedentary citizens living within state borders, they now cater to populations who are increasingly mobile, have multiple citizenships and lead lives crisscrossing national borders (Boccagni et al. 2015). Meanwhile, within the systems, policymakers, bureaucrats and social workers face challenges (Furman et al. 2008). According to national political will, the systems adapt: policies and regulations undergo reformulation, institutions reorganise and individuals' everyday work changes. About two decades ago, Levitt (2001: 196) found that states increasingly offer 'social and political membership to those residing outside their territories', but the findings of the current study call into question whether she would reach the same conclusion today.

This article delves into the crust of the Norwegian welfare state. It zooms in on a specific group of bureaucrats faced with transnational social security provision. These officials provide national benefits (sickness-, family- and work-related benefits and pensions) to clients

who lead transnational lives. Drawing on the research question ‘how do Norwegian welfare structures accommodate an increasingly mobile population?’, I scrutinise the challenges these bureaucrats experience. Doing so, I draw on – and add new insights to – scholarship on transnational migration (e.g. Levitt 2001) and transnational social policy and social work (e.g. Crettaz 2017; Hunter et al. 2010; Righard 2018).

The article begins with contextualising my analysis through an historical recap of Norwegian cross-border welfare provision and a brief description of the fieldwork. Next, I present a framework for research on national welfare organisations’ transnational work. The final and key part of the article reveals the tangled web of transnational welfare provision through a scalar analysis of institutional adaptation. Here, I find and illustrate how bureaucratic entrepreneurship surfaces when state structures are unapt. The article concludes by contemplating how mainstreaming has surpassed specialisation to become the Norwegian social security system NAV’s main approach to accommodate transnationalism.

Welfare Management: From Norwegian Sailors to Transnational Diversity

Transnational living is an old phenomenon. In Norway, public welfare provision for individuals living abroad stretches back to before World War II, though the essence and the volume of transnational casework have transformed over the years. First, due to the war, the number of cross-border clients skyrocketed. Established in Oslo in 1947, a special unit called The Office of Social Insurance for Sailors Abroad catered to Norwegians, mostly sailors and state officials, who had served abroad during the war (Auestad 1997). At the time, overseas social insurance mainly consisted of sickness services and benefits. The following year the entitlement was expanded to include not only Norwegians but also other individuals who lived abroad while holding permanent residence status in Norway. Contrary to what the institution had anticipated, the office’s workload continued to swell in the post-war years. The number of sailors and other workers who received Norwegian benefits abroad doubled over 10 years, reaching approximately 50,000 in 1961. When the National Social Insurance Scheme was established in 1967, the sailors’ office responsibilities expanded to include pension provision, social insurance provision for students and collection of social security payments from all insurance scheme members abroad – the last task executed in close cooperation with the Norwegian tax administration (Auestad 1997).

Although the number of sailors started to decrease, the overall transnational population diversified. Firms internationalised and more workers travelled from or were stationed abroad (Tjelmeland & Brochmann 2003). Along with the discovery of oil, the growth of a multinational workforce in the oil sector led to an increase in transnational casework – clients had a range of different nationalities and worked or stayed in multiple countries. Simultaneously, Norway signed numerous bilateral and multilateral social insurance agreements. Accordingly, in 1977, the office was renamed the National Office for Social Insurance Abroad.

Statistics are scarce on the overall number of transnational clients until the 2000s. Data on ‘pensioners’ – those receiving disability or retirement pensions – who live abroad suggest a stable but accelerating growth since the 1970s. The number increased from 1,000 transnational pensioners in 1978 to 11,000 in 1990, 28,000 in 2000 and 44,000 in 2010. In 2018, approximately 60,000 individuals received pensions abroad (Auestad 1997; Skarpaas 2014; NAV 2019). The acceleration in transnational casework is related partly to increased cross-border mobility and living, and partly to shifts in international regulations and social insurance conventions. The latter have enabled people not only to live and work across borders but also to export and import welfare benefits. Through its membership in the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement since 1994, Norway became part of the EU internal market that regulates the transferability of rights and the portability of benefits within the EU

(Andresen 2015). As I was told by several experienced bureaucrats in NAV, signing the EEA Agreement was decisive in the ensuing growth of transnational living, including the trend of moving abroad among pensioners.

Current transnational clients are a highly diverse group. Norwegian public social security is provided to all members of the insurance scheme. In principle, this includes everyone residing in Norway (with an intended 12-month or longer stay) or working in Norway (even if residing abroad). Clients' nationality and migration background are largely irrelevant for the allocation of benefits. Several benefits are provided to everyone at specific times in the life cycle, such as child and parental benefits and retirement pensions. This means that transnational clients comprise all socioeconomic layers of the society, spread across national and age groups.

Although the relative size of exported instalments increased following World War II, the number appears to have stabilised over the last 10 years (Andersen & Folkvord 2016; Skarpaas 2014). Indeed, the amount of overall social security benefits exported abroad made up 1.6% of NAV's total payments in 2010 and 1.7% in 2018.

Yet, simultaneously, the total number of people abroad receiving Norwegian benefits has soared from 57,000 to 75,000 (NAV 2019). These numbers do not include the transnational clients who reside in Norway (while receiving benefits from abroad) – therefore they do not mirror the overall number of NAV's transnational clients – though they shed light on the growth in NAV's transnational casework.¹

Concerning a larger organisational change in 2006, the Office for Social Insurance Abroad was renamed the National Office for International Social Security (locally known as NAV International). Although the aim was to decentralise tasks, NAV International has since faced a growing bulk of casework and an increase in and diversification of transnational clients.

As a result of the historical expansions of the office, and the growth and diversification of its clients, NAV International had evolved to become a unique and transnationally geared workplace. Even though they faced day-to-day work challenges, the bureaucrats I spoke with during fieldwork were generally enthusiastic about the transnational dimension of their work. Marie, a family-benefits caseworker, explained how their work was more exotic than the nationally limited NAV, saying: 'You work with different countries, different institutions, different people speaking different languages. It's pretty exciting!'. As the topic of transnational casework was enthusiastically received among the bureaucrats, it confirmed my expectation of NAV International as a key place for research on the welfare state's encounter with transnational clients.

Fieldwork and Data

My fieldwork at NAV International took place in 2015 and 2016. I also went to the Directorate of Labour and Welfare (from here on 'the directorate'), which oversees NAV, and several other NAV offices dealing with welfare provision within and beyond Norway. As part of my institutional ethnographic methodology, I tried to understand what was going on at these workplaces from the individual bureaucrats' standpoint (Smith 2005): how *they* experienced the transnational aspect of their work and their encounter with cross-border clients. This approach focuses on individuals, and the social relations they are embedded in, within institutions. By getting on 'the inside' of NAV, my aim was to observe everyday practices and understand how people's 'work knowledge' influenced their practices (Smith 2005: 151).

¹ The term 'transnational' was not common at NAV, with people instead using 'international', 'foreign' or 'abroad'. This article uses 'transnational' to denote the cross-border nature of NAV International's work with clients who have lived or currently live abroad.

This article draws on 31 interviews with people who worked or had been working at NAV International. Eleven of them had been there for more than 15 years, and three since the early 1980s. Most of those who worked there, particularly the younger generations, had higher education. Although some were educated as social workers, none at the office worked directly with clients in the form of social work. Most were assigned with casework concerning social security provision, or related managerial tasks. Many had worked in national-oriented units before joining the international office. The questions I asked them were open-ended and explorative, focusing on the individuals themselves, their understanding of their clients, work practices, challenges and solutions. I collected additional insights through observation: I attended several staff meetings and listened in on 33 phone calls between councillors and anonymous transnational clients.²

To ensure anonymity, I use pseudonyms when citing interviewees and only mention the unit or area that they worked in when relevant. Throughout the article, the term 'bureaucrats' encompasses all these individuals, though I highlight their different roles when referring to them as caseworkers or unit leaders. Although categorising different individuals as 'bureaucrats' reduces the diversity among them, I do so as the article primarily explores *trends* in transnational welfare provision.

Transnational Welfare: A Research Positioning

In their research on emerging transnational social work practices in Belgium, Withaecx et al. (2017: 145) find that highly mobile transnational immigrants present specific dilemmas for social workers that 'distinguish them from other migrants'. Likewise, the bureaucrats in NAV International experience a range of dilemmas in their encounter with the transnational population. Some are similar but still slightly different to those encountered in national casework. The most major challenges are tied to the *transnational* aspect of their work.

NAV bureaucrats encounter a diverse array of people who lead transnational lives, including nationals and foreigners who have previously resided abroad, are involved in transnational commuting or currently spend most of their time abroad. This mirrors the academic acknowledgement that the nature of transnational migration and living influence social policy differently than when individuals 'leave country A to settle in country B' (Crettaz 2017: 2). The bureaucratic frustrations I analyse here are thus not tied to a specific segment of people who lead transnational lives (e.g. immigrants). Although shape and scope of dilemmas vary across the geographies of the transnational cases, the most pressing challenges were tied to the nature of the *casework*, not the clients' individual characteristics or behaviour.

There is an expanding literature on transnational welfare, including transnationally oriented research in the fields of social policy, social security and social work (see e.g. An et al. 2016; Boccagni et al. 2015; Lyons 2015). As these fields focus on different professions and scales, they represent different segments of a larger welfare system and research on it. To avoid conflating previous findings, I use the exact same terminology as applied when referring to existing literature. Yet, for reasons of simplification, or when generalising across fields and research findings, I use the broader term transnational welfare.

Transnational welfare research scrutinises 'transnational challenges', highlighting that welfare practices were not originally oriented 'towards cross-border interrelationships' (Olivier-Mensah et al. 2017: 124). Normatively and ideally, cross-border welfare practice should

² The study is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (44498). I asked the interviewees for consent twice: in advance and at the start of the interviews. I did not ask for consent from the anonymous clients' whose phone calls I listened to, but permission to listen was granted me by NAV. I have not used explicit or detailed information from these conversations in my research output. None of the data collected has been shared with others.

not lead to social differentiations. To overcome this, people working with welfare provision can engage with multiple policies and collaborate across borders. This logic has been increasingly recognised as transnational clients' social lives often are found to be entangled in different geographical spaces (Hunter et al. 2010). Several researchers thus advocate for a transnational epistemology and present it as a more suitable alternative to 'methodological nationalism, the sedentary bias, and container theories of society' (Righard & Boccagni 2015: 230).

A transnational lens requires people working with welfare provision – including policy-makers, caseworkers, other bureaucrats and social workers – to think and act both within and beyond state borders. While many may agree of this goal, few have yet scrutinised how this should play out in day-to-day work practices. A notable exemption is Hunter et al. (2010: 223), who craft 'intervention strategies' for social workers whose clients live across borders. An important premise for effective work, they state, is that workers understand transnational migration and its driving factors. They further establish guiding principles for organisations working with transnationals. This agenda rests on a scalar framework, where different innovative actions can be carried out on micro-, meso- and macro-scales. Although most of their concerns remain tied to *immigrants'* needs, such as legal status and integration, the conceptualisation of scalar responses to transnationalism from a welfare state perspective appears valuable. Withaekx et al. (2017) draw on this model to map how social workers can develop an awareness of transnationalism, become transnational players themselves and challenge dominant policies. The idea that the workers can carry out or contribute to change across institutional scales also corresponds to Mladovsky (2009), who, in relation to migrant health-care, advocates for a three-tiered scalar analysis to understand official responses to diversity: government policies, the actual services that are offered and the ways workers act and behave.

Righard and Boccagni (2015) provide a different take on the connections between transnationalism and national welfare. They do not guide social work practice but offer a model to 'facilitate further elaboration on the social work–migration nexus', arguing that social work is 'not *either* transnationally *or* locally bound' (Righard & Boccagni 2015: 238). They highlight that the degree of transnationalism in work practices can vary. For instance, if a bureaucrat converses over Skype with a client abroad, the practice is intermediately transnational. The idea of transnational practice 'degrees' resembles Levitt's (2001) model. She illustrates that practices can be comprehensive or selective in their scope (i.e. more or less regular) and stretch from core to expanded (i.e. more or less institutionalised). Righard and Boccagni (2015) similarly suggest that the extent of institutionalisation of transnational work practices can vary. Here, institutionalisation refers to whether practices are integrated in the formal organisational structures of the workplace. For example, if Skype counselling is part of the official policy, it is highly institutionalised. If it has become regular practice in the organisation but remains tied to individuals' initiatives, it is less, or perhaps not at all, institutionalised (Righard 2018).

In my encounter with NAV, the frustrations with developing apt practices to accommodate clients were at first sight all-encompassing. The bureaucrats' transnational work was diverse, and there was no obvious or inherent logic to either their frustrations or their responses. They worked with a range of people (of various ages, nationalities, family and work situations) who were scattered around the globe (in Norway, neighbouring countries, Europe or on other continents) receiving different benefits (pensions, sickness-, family- or work-related benefits), and with various relevant policy frameworks (the national insurance scheme, bilateral and international social security agreements). Their work practices were not only tied to with these parameters, but the bureaucrats constantly operated in the entangled web of transnational and national dynamics. Therefore, systematic mapping became key to explore how NAV adapted to accommodate transnational living, a process which resulted in a scalar framework for research on transnational welfare management.

Transnational Welfare Management: A Research Framework

Depending on how the interviewees spoke about and organised the practicalities of their work, I categorised their work to allocate where, how and what within the organisation shaped ongoing adaptations. Doing so, I was able to see which structures were lacking, the challenges underpinning bureaucrats' frustrations and how they solved them in practice. This mapping came to resemble Hunter et al.'s (2010) and Mladovsky's (2009) suggestions for a scalar analysis of organisations' responses to transnationalism and diversity. I identified three particular scales of relevance, representing (1) workers' practices, (2) organisational structures and work tools, and (3) organisational policies. The mapping also resembled Levitt (2001) and Righard and Boccagni's (2015) models of transnational (social work) practices as more or less transnationalised and more or less institutionalised. Drawing on existing theoretical perspectives and insights from the empirical analysis I suggest a three-dimensional analytical framework illustrated as a model in **Figure 1**. The model can be used as a tool to map welfare work's extent of (1) formalisation, (2) transnationalisation and (3) whether these operate at the micro-, meso- or macro-scale of the organisation. I illustrate the use of the model in the ensuing analysis.

Whereas Righard and Boccagni (2015) highlight institutionalisation, my framework focuses on formalisation. The reason is that processes of institutionalisation in an organisation can be bottom-up, such as in the creation of an institutionalised work culture, yet not formalised. I deem it more relevant to map the degree to which work practices are part of the organisation's formal policy. The notion of 'formalisation' here refers to organisational rules and guidelines as given by the management. It can be measured as 'degrees' in the sense that written rules are highly formal – and to different degrees depending on the type of text (e.g. regulations versus guidelines) – while oral instructions are less formal. When a practice has not been supported by any organisational rule, guideline or leader, I refer to it as informal. My understanding of transnationalisation refers to the degree to which their work is transnationally oriented. For instance, if a bureaucrat travels abroad, the practice is highly transnational. If the bureaucrats ignore the transnational aspects of a client's life and process the case as though the client lives solely in Norway, the work practice is not transnational.

1 Micro-Scale Practices: Tackling Frustrations through Specialisation

Gradual adaption and specialisation have accommodated the diversification and increase of transnational casework in the Norwegian welfare system. At the time of fieldwork, NAV International's office was organised along the same principle: close-knit teams specialised in

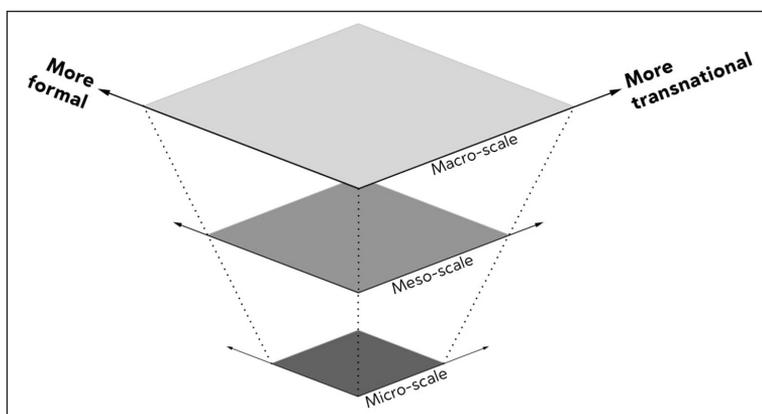


Figure 1: A model to map national welfare organisations' transnational work.

a particular benefit, and often with a delimited region (e.g. unemployment benefits in the EEA). They worked together to disentangle relevant regulations as well as discuss and carry out transnational casework. In-depth knowledge of or long-term experience with a specific rule, benefit or international legislative framework was key to solving challenges. Those who long had worked with a specific and steadily more complex field became in-house specialists whose expertise was sought after by many. Colleagues from different units turned to them to understand difficult cases, unravel regulations in relation to a specific case or get advice. In some units, one or two experts formed the backbone of the team. 'The day she quits, we'll have a serious problem,' unit leader Christine said about a veteran lawyer, the only in a large unit who knew the details surrounding a set of social security agreements. In these cases, the colleagues feared what would happen if the expert quit or retired, as there was no formalised system to secure knowledge exchange on specific, often small, areas of transnational benefits provision. Often, I was told, these regulative experts were the only ones who managed to ensure that rare or difficult cases got solved in line with the regulations.

The need for linguistic expertise was also brought up. The bureaucrats' experiences mirrored what has been well established in research, namely that language barriers complicate or hinder work with foreign clients (see e.g. Olivier-Mensah et al. 2017). NAV's formal guidelines for communication with clients who speak or write in foreign languages is to use state-certified interpreters and translators. However, with poor resources available, the use of such services often did not take place. Many of the bureaucrats I spoke with highlighted this, problematising the lack of resources to secure sound communication. At NAV International several subunits were in the same building so the bureaucrats could walk to another floor or corridor and fetch a colleague with the language competence they needed. A caseworker who often did this said: 'The thing that's good with NAV International is that we have a diversity of different ethnic groups working here. That's a major benefit for us. We have plenty of languages, like French, Spanish, Italian... If you need it, you'll find someone who can translate for you'. Such ad hoc use of interpreters and translators was not always sufficient for the bureaucrats to accommodate the transnational clients as they would have liked or were required to. Not adhering to the official guidelines, the practice was scorned by many.

Establishing trust with clients from other cultural backgrounds or with experiences from other state structures could similarly obstruct the casework process. Although there has been a general call for increased intercultural competence in welfare organisations to avoid racism and oppression (see e.g. Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield 2014), this was not a priority in any of the offices or units I visited. Lacking guidelines on how to deal with cultural issues led to diverging practices. Although some unit leaders disapproved of it, others hired caseworkers with cultural competences who also worked as cultural and linguistic interpreters even though they had no professional experience in these fields. Four such bureaucrats I spoke with recognised the strength of their language and cultural competences, though also highlighted the challenges of acting as an intermediary while remaining state representatives and caseworkers. The widespread use of such informal knowledge and expertise resembles findings from studies calling for increased diversity among social workers and health professionals: the workers' transnational engagement and awareness clearly influence, and improve, their ability to accommodate cross-border clients (Bolzman 2015). Despite the lack of formal endorsement – and the administrative leaders' different takes on this – most caseworkers made use of the in-house expertise when needed.

These practices clearly reveal a need for specialised knowledge. First, there was need for expertise on regulations, which was partly recognised as the office was structured in subunits focusing on specific benefits. Second, there was need for linguistic and cultural competence. The caseworkers' approach to specialising their services according to their clients' transnational lives also supports the argument that transnational welfare work practice should

move beyond cultural competences (Hunter et al. 2010; Lyons 2015) and integrate a 'transnational lens'. This implies that the clients should be viewed from a transnational, rather than a national, perspective (Boccagni et al. 2015).

Those working on transnational issues in NAV largely had an open approach to who their transnational clients were (Author 2019a). The majority seemed unconstrained by 'us-versus-them' dichotomies when they thought about their clients (see Righard 2018 for further discussions on this). This signals that the bureaucrats had developed some extent of transnational understanding, in similarity to the findings of social workers' transnational 'awareness' in Belgium (Withaecx et al. 2017). However, at all the offices I visited, they largely spoke about their clients' behaviour as operating in a vacuum: regulations, rather than other state attachments or relationships outside of Norway, were highlighted as the decisive factor influencing their transnational clients' behaviour (Author 2019b). So even though the individual bureaucrats were eager to be transnationally oriented in their work, they did not seem to be sufficiently aware of their clients' transnational reality to premise their work on 'the desires and needs' of the individual clients, which is an explicitly stated aim in the Norwegian welfare system (JBD 2006).

As with clients, regulative language and cultural barriers came to the fore when bureaucrats collaborated with their counterparts in other countries. Far from taking a transnational 'wraparound' approach – where service providers collaborate closely across borders to assist cross-border clients (see e.g. Furman et al. 2008) – the bureaucrats faced difficulties with cross-border collaboration. For example, bureaucrats in the EEA common social security system can distribute casework files and official documents in their national language. This made the Norwegian bureaucrats turn, again, to their colleagues with language expertise. Some mentioned using Google Translate as a last resort. Yet, as Marie told me, this could often have negative consequences. She explained: 'The way you refer to regulations in Norway is different than the way you do it in other countries. The formal aspects of the languages are different... Therefore, [the translated information] simply comes out wrong'. A tougher dilemma was the difference between countries' legal systems and interpretations. At the time of research, there was no efficient international communication system for bureaucrats in different countries to solve regulative disagreements. They had to turn to lengthy back-and-forth correspondence through regular mail to solve misunderstandings or disagreements, often in different languages. They highlighted bureaucratic cultural variations, especially across Europe. Speaking on how regulative interpretations differed, Camilla, a caseworker with 14 years' experience, observed: 'The French [system] is very rigid. Very bureaucratic and formal. Some of the Eastern European countries are also difficult to relate to. And the Italian...'. Most often such issues were resolved, but other times the different legislative understandings were communicated to the directorate for them to tackle it on the structural scale. When they did not hear back, I was told, individual bureaucrats tended to draw on their previous experience and found a practical solution. They might, for example, solve the issue by doing what they thought would be best for the client and simply ignore the bilateral misunderstanding.

2 Meso-Scale Structures: Resource Needs and Bureaucratic Entrepreneurship

Hunter et al. (2010) suggest that meso-scale interventions in social work with transnationals can take the form of community work. Their framework highlights interventions to empower transnationals such as through direct service provision and close communication. Meso-scale dynamics at NAV are not oriented towards the community but rather can be conceptualised as the structures of their working life –that is, the organisational infrastructure and work tools. These structures influence how micro-scale practices enable, but also hinder, bureaucratic adaption to accommodate transnational living.

Over the last two decades, the Norwegian welfare system has been transformed to increase its automatic processing capacity. New structures and technologies have been put in place and, unintendedly, transnational casework has been pushed to the system's outskirts. The complexity of international regulations and the constantly changing nature of transnational cases make these cases unfit for automatic processing. The gap between national and transnational casework efficiency has thus increased. Transnational casework has long been understood as more resource-demanding. The cases are highly diverse, often complex and unique. Although the load of transnational casework rocketed in the 1990s, the international office was granted insufficient resources. A few of the unit leaders I spoke with recounted how they could not employ enough bureaucrats to process the cases. Hence, a fast-growing backlog: hundreds of transnational clients waited months, if not years, to receive the benefits they were entitled. Following each EU enlargement, and subsequently more clients, the unit leaders pushed for change. Although the directorate steadily granted more resources, the general sentiment remained that the international branch continually received too few resources too late. This led to 'towering piles' of unprocessed casework, according to Benjamin, who worked on unemployment benefits. When the ideal of automatisisation began being realised, it worsened the transnational apparatus. The nationally oriented units upped efficiency but the transnational units fell further behind.

The Office of the Auditor General, which monitors the public sector in Norway, has repeatedly criticised NAV International's recent performance and organisation. It has pointed to several severe issues, including a general lack of prioritisation, which has led to understaffing and far too lengthy casework processing. Some, but not all, bureaucrats blamed this on the poor quality of communication with the directorate and the administrative leaders. They stressed the urgency for improved vertical communication. Besides calling for more resources, which most acknowledged would be difficult to fulfil, they also signalled instances in which legislative formulations or schemes were unapt for a situation. When calls for change went unheard, some bureaucrats found their own solutions to process the cases of concern even if it meant diverging from legal requirements or work guidelines. This mirrors research evidence from transnational social work, highlighting the lack of institutional guidance for working with transnational populations (e.g. Furman et al. 2008). It also shows how innovative solutions surface to tackle challenges in the transnational space (Rodima-Taylor et al. 2019) Indeed, at NAV International, entrepreneurship was often used to solve issues regarding transnational information provision, communication and, relatedly, information and communications technology (ICT).

Caseworkers working with benefits that might require close follow-up, such as long-time sick leave, underscored the hassle of communicating with clients abroad. How could they ensure that the clients were well taken care of or that they behaved as they should when they could not meet them? The difficulties of cross-border communication also came up among caseworkers who, ideally, were to communicate with their clients through NAV's online chat and forms. Clients without Norwegian citizenship or a Norwegian work permit struggle to obtain a Norwegian registration number (D-number). Without the number, they cannot log into Norwegian digital public services, such as NAV's communications portal. The bureaucrats were formally not allowed to use email communication due to security measures and therefore had to trust the ordinary postal system in such cases.

Jacob, a client counsellor, conveyed his frustrations with this practice, underscoring that 'mail in Namibia takes time!'. In states with poor infrastructure, the bureaucrats could not always know if their client had received letters. They could not call to relay sensitive critical information. In response, several turned to email even though the regulations did not

provide for this. When I asked how they used email at a specific unit, Amanda, one of the leaders at NAV International, said:

For instance, sending a letter to Thailand may take ages. [The clients] often ask us to send an email or fax.... We prioritize the practical aspect. Whether it's legal or not? I really don't know for sure, but email is not a secure channel. But when letters aren't returned and people live in rural areas or places like that... In those cases it's simply best to use email.

Few studies examine the use of ICT between state actors and individuals who live across borders. Hunter et al. (2010) highlight the usefulness of new technologies, such as Skype, and online communication in social work, but do not discuss the hindrance of institutional structures. Using ICT as a cross-border communication tool proved to be more a normative idea than a practical reality among the NAV transitional welfare workers. While such structures for support were immediately available in national casework, these new and efficient tools could rarely be used in cross-border casework.

Technological deficiencies led to technological innovations. Early in the fieldwork I observed how some bureaucrats used decades-old computer software. William showed me the software used in the social security membership unit, saying: 'This is one of the main programs. It's made in 1978, I think. The other one is from the early 1980s'. The program he showed me appeared as just a black screen with text in basic yellow font. 'It's pretty retro', he said, smilingly. William and caseworkers in other units told me how a few employees with basic programming skills had invented custom-made programs and spreadsheets for their units. One software program, nicknamed Grisen (meaning 'pig'), was allegedly made by a person in the directorate in the 1980s in order to help his mother, who at the time was the only person working on unemployment benefits abroad. While the use of old, homemade tools was presented with humour, the issue was grave. Several bureaucrats told me they did not trust the technology. A colleague of William said: 'We have patched up and repaired this system throughout the years, and we still use it. But it's not good: the system is vulnerable. Few people have the competence needed [to fix it] and it may break down'.

William elaborated on ways ahead, saying: 'It will be important to incorporate the international aspects in the data systems. It's unbelievable that they are so old... Some of the most critical systems are 30 years old'. Speaking of system crash fears, Camilla concluded: 'It's very scary. But, we've reported it, so they [in the department] are very aware of this'. Previous research argues that the crucial challenge of transnational work is to focus on the specific, transnational circumstances in clients' lives. Boccagni et al. (2015) correctly underscore that this task 'is not a merely technological one'. Through my fieldwork, however, I saw the cruciality of ICT and infrastructure. Once the transnational awareness was established – to some extent as it was at NAV International – the technical and structural deficiency became the key obstacle for transnational work.

3 Macro-Scale Policy: Mainstreaming Transnational Welfare

The bureaucrats turned to specialisation and entrepreneurship to overcome transnational work dilemmas, but some noted how the most severe shortcomings concerned lack of policy change and political focus. On the macro-scale, NAV and the directorate were involved in several international coordination and collaboration mechanisms, such as the Nordic Council's committee for welfare, the EEA working group on social security coordination and the Swedish–Norwegian border council. These policy encounters were key to develop the

frameworks for cross-border collaboration, yet they were far removed from the caseworkers' everyday implementation work. A few I spoke to had participated in or provided insights into such macro-scale efforts, but their experiences of proximity to policymaking were shared by few. It thus appeared that some macro-scale actions towards accommodating transnational migrations were 'more symbolic than substantive' (Levitt 2001: 204). While some bureaucrats themselves had participated in practical infrastructure-related groups like those mentioned before, these encounters had become increasingly top-heavy. This resulted in long stretches between the directorate's efforts and NAV International's work. Simon, one of the office leaders, said:

We do not get information about what happens in the directorate. That gives us no possibility to influence or correct. And if we get invited to a meeting with them about an on-going process, it tends to be a bit too late...

During the fieldwork, I learned that a major organisational change was on its way. NAV International was to be shut down. Transnational casework needed to be mainstreamed, integrated across the national offices in NAV. This meant that bureaucrats focusing on a specific benefit should cater to all clients, nationals and transnationals alike. Most of the caseworkers I talked with were highly sceptical. 'I don't get it!' exclaimed Anna, a senior caseworker. 'They specialize the different national areas, but scatter the international area... What do they prioritize? It's quick proceedings. Not quality and regulative compliance'. Some signalled an ambiguous understanding of why NAV chose this move, saying the decision was grounded in political and economic interests. NAV would look better for the politicians and the Office of the Auditor General if the international branch's resource demand decreased, even if only on paper.

The top-led turnaround was likely to respond both to the Auditor General's criticism and to the steady growth of voices from below calling for more expertise and resources. Using ad hoc solutions was acknowledged as problematic, and institutional change had long been knocking on the door of the directorate. I traced the process of decision-making to grasp how they had landed on the decision to shut down. Finally interviewing some key actors who were involved in the process, I was informed that the idea happened to be hatched up by one person and then took off. After a long internal process of discussing and planning for potential future scenarios, they finally decided to go for it. When I asked why they mainstreamed rather than specialised further, some highlighted economic incentives, while others presented it as a decision to adapt to globalisation. It was important to integrate the transnational branch with the national apparatus, since the future would be marked by more, not less, international mobility. In one way, this argument is consistent with the Norwegian welfare model ideal of inclusivity, built on the pillars of universalism and egalitarianism (Bendixen et al. 2017). Integrating nationals and transnationals into one system could establish equal ground for everyone to receive equal treatment. The economic foundations were clear, they said: the scale of automatisisation went up in the standard national cases and the scale of manual processing went up in the minor international branch. To solve the skewed development, where relatively more resources went to the smaller branch, they merged the groups, letting each bureaucrat work on both national and transnational cases.

Caseworkers did not agree with these ideas. They said the tools and structures required would be just as crucial in the new organisational structure, and that the economic picture would look the same even if the names on the budget allocations changed. Rather, they anticipated that less specialisation would harm their work. The directorate and administrative

leaders considered the possibility of losing expertise due to the reorganisation, though they had no plan to solve the potentially adverse consequences. 'The international branch is a particularly skills-demanding area. What's most important is that these skills be preserved through the reorganization,' Simon stated, going on to state that he dreaded this would not be the case.

When I discussed NAV International's concerns with directorate staff, many showed understanding. Yet, they explained it as anticipated, arguing that major organisational changes always get criticised. Some also dismissed the caseworkers' concerns. These reflections mirror the finding that micro-scale practices and meso-scale structures were transnationally oriented, but lacked institutional anchoring and support. Indeed, the opposite appeared to be the case. On the macro-scale, NAV adapted to the dilemmas of transnational casework through mainstreaming. This process was highly formal, but far removed from the hands-on realities of the bureaucrats and their clients.

The question of whether transnational cases and clients should be accommodated through specialisation has implications on practical as well as normative levels. The changes in NAV happened without any political debate. I was told there was no political will to take this up for discussion because no political party would gain anything. However, the potential risk of mainstreaming is, as many I spoke with highlighted, greater instances of unequal service provision, where transnational cases get less attention, poorer services and lengthier casework processes than national ones. In other words, mainstreaming looks promising on paper, but in practice it may have little to offer.

Discussion and Conclusions

NAV adapts differently to accommodate transnational living at the micro-, meso- and macro-scales. The practices, structures and dynamics are formal and transnational to different extents. To illustrate these variations, I have mapped the processes in the model presented earlier on (Figure 2). Here, micro-scale practices, carried out by the bureaucrats on the ground, are demonstrated as intermediately transnational. The bureaucrats centre on the transnational aspects of their clients and casework in a selective manner, as only a few, specific work practices are cross-border in nature. This resembles Levitt's (2001) conceptualisation of selectivity as being in opposition to comprehensive transnational practices, which do not take place

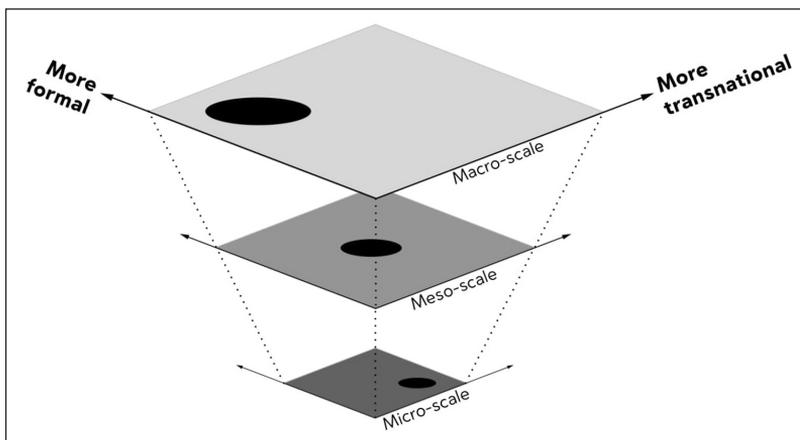


Figure 2: A model of NAV's transnational work. The model illustrates the degrees of transnationalisation and formalisation in the organisation's process of adapting to accommodate increased transnational living.

on any scale in NAV. While transnational specialisation on regulations, language and culture is widespread, these adaptive measures have no formal anchoring. In comparison, the meso-scale structures are more formalised, as many entrepreneurial ICT solutions have been incorporated in official work processes. These structures mainly focus on solving challenges within the Norwegian system. Less formal yet structural adaptations are more transnationally geared, for example, the culture of using email and phone calls to communicate with clients abroad. Finally, the adaptations that take place on the macro-scale appear furthest removed from the transnational realities on the ground. While transnational work takes place on the macro-scale, for example, in policy fora, it is not necessarily geared towards solving day-to-day challenges in bureaucratic work. While highly formalised, the process towards mainstreaming transnational work is aimed at solving challenges within the national space.

The use of this model reveals erratic practices of transnational welfare management in NAV. Bureaucrats experience frustrations and dilemmas in their transnational work. There is a strong need for specialised knowledge and transnationally geared structures, but they are not at the core of the welfare system's concerns. Others have suggested that transnationalism can occur 'from above', for example, through global governance, or 'from below', through the everyday practices of individuals (Smith & Guarnizo 1998). This case study illustrates this. Whereas transnational work, historically, has taken place across scales in NAV, recent practices are more visible on the individual micro-scale, while less action comes 'from above'. NAV adjusted in accordance with changing global dynamics in the past, but current top-down responses appear to tighten the scope for such adaptations.

There is no clearly confined academic discourse on formal transnational welfare provision and management (Boccagni et al. 2015). Although some attentions are given to transnational social security provision (see e.g. Righard 2017), most of the relevant researches focus on social policy or social work. I believe that this study contributes to broadening these discussions. Highlighting social security – which is less physically and locally oriented than other welfare strands, such as social work – helps illuminate the mobile and overseas part of the transnational population. They are often not included in the growing bulk of research on transnational welfare provision, which most often studies minority immigrant populations within national borders. This study, besides broadening research on transnational welfare, furthers it. Although the aforementioned fields tend to be developed separately, they all deal with how formal welfare structures encounter different forms of migration-induced diversity. The framework developed herein can be used by transnational welfare researchers to map features of this encounter, and how it is managed, in their respective fields.

The insights from this article raise, and begin to unpack, more general questions about nation-states' responsibilities. Whom should the national welfare container contain? Where should the boundary between inclusion and equality fall when welfare provision is transnationalised? This analysis reveals how these challenges play out in the Norwegian social security system, highlighting the frictions and evolving responses in encounters between the national and the transnational. In Norway, some of these frictions and transitions are left out of the public political sphere. By reorganising the welfare system's transnational structures out of the public eye, a major political question can be bypassed: to what extent should the public welfare system accommodate transnational living? While bureaucrats on the ground strive to uphold their duties of providing equally good services, also targeted at the transnational populations' needs, the power of policy gets diminished. This reminds us that the welfare state, which is 'fundamentally tied up with the modern project and the nation state', is 'a sedentary construct' (Boccagni et al. 2015: 313).

The administrative evolution is noteworthy. The way national institutions are structured 'exerts a tremendous influence' over individual transnational practices (Levitt 2001: 203). The Norwegian welfare system shapes people's agency and ability to live across borders. Blurring

the transnational lens in the institutional structures may lead to unequal treatment and widen the gap between sedentary and mobile populations. Levitt introduced her 2001 article stating how states responded to transnational migration and social policy through increased international collaboration and adaptation. My article's conclusion points in a different direction. Considering the global trend of nationalist politics (Bieber 2018), this may not come as a surprise. Indeed, the current turnaround in the Norwegian welfare system, internationally acclaimed for its universal and egalitarian foundations, may signal a pullback in the national welfare container's transnational accommodation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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