

## **A knowledge hierarchy in the labour and welfare services? Evidence-based and practice-based knowledge in frontline service innovation**

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### **Abstract**

Although policy-makers and scholars have directed increasing attention towards collaborative innovation and knowledge development between frontline agencies and workers and other stakeholders such as citizens and researchers, empirical research has not focused on the (varying) assessment of collaborators regarding what knowledge would be ‘appropriate’ to develop. In this paper, we examine such knowledge assessments by drawing on a comparative case study of two local innovation projects conducted by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in a four-year service innovation programme. Although they responded to the same call, the projects involved development of two very distinct types of knowledge; one dealt with practice-based knowledge and the other with evidence-based knowledge. We show that whereas the former knowledge type was contested and difficult to transform into practice, the latter involved few (if any) contests and was implemented on a relatively large scale. These two projects point to the possible existence of a hierarchy of knowledge in the labour and welfare services, where evidence-based forms of knowledge and methods are regarded as more legitimate and appropriate than forms of knowledge placed ‘lower’ in the hierarchy. We discuss the reasons for and implications of this apparent hierarchy of knowledge for frontline labour and welfare services.

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## **Introduction**

In the beginning of 2013, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) initiated a four-year service knowledge development programme called "Practice and knowledge development in NAV offices" (henceforth PKD). NAV is responsible for activation of vulnerable citizens, i.e. unemployed citizens with complex combinations of health, cognitive, mental and social challenges, and the PKD programme was to contribute to development of services for this group of citizens. The services were to be developed through collaboration between four institutional actors: frontline workers, researchers, educational institutions, and users. The programme consisted of three locally developed research and development projects in various regions of Norway.

PKD can be understood as an attempt by the government to meet new demands for the provision of knowledge-based labour and welfare services, i.e. services based on systematically developed research-based knowledge, the experiential knowledge of frontline workers, and the needs and demands of citizens (Godfrey, 2001; Miles, 2000; Webb, 2001). To meet these demands, PKD involved creation of an epistemic infrastructure around the NAV offices in which the frontline workers would participate in research and development (R&D) of new services together with researchers (and their universities) and citizens. This epistemic infrastructure is consonant with ideas of collaborative innovation that aim to bring together actors from different professional and institutional backgrounds to define common problems and develop joint solutions (Bommert, 2010; Entwistle & Martin, 2005; Hartley, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2013: 826; Rashman, Withers, & Hartley, 2009; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

Knowledge-based services are needed more broadly because the field of labour and welfare services in Norway is highly politicized and hence comprises a range of actors (e.g., public agencies, researchers, service providers, third sector organisations, and universities) with different conceptions regarding the type of knowledge on which the services should be based. The implications of evidence-based knowledge and practices, i.e. knowledge developed with systematic and rigorous methods and operationalised through intervention programmes involving work manuals or routines, have been a crucial topic of discussion (Greener & Greve, 2013; Grol & Wensing, 2004; Pawson, 2006). Much of the interest in evidence seems to come from the healthcare sector, which has a much longer tradition of evidence-based practice than labour and welfare services, including social work (Nicolini, Powell, Conville, & Martinez-Solano, 2008).

Despite increased policy emphasis on knowledge development and innovation in frontline labour and welfare services, relatively little is known about how such activities take place in practice and how they impact frontline work. Ferlie et al. (2013: 192) argue that the nature of knowledge itself must be addressed to understand epistemic practices and boundaries. In a study in the healthcare services, Martin, Currie and Lockett (2011) found that commissioners of research and researchers had very different accounts of what was considered appropriate and good-quality research. Hence, we believe that there is a need for increased understanding of how different assessments of the ‘right’ or ‘appropriate’ knowledge for labour and welfare services to vulnerable citizens impact service innovation. On this basis, our research question in this paper is the following: *How do different notions of appropriate knowledge impact service innovation in labour and welfare services?*

In our analysis, we elaborate on two projects in the PKD program, one of which sought to develop practice-oriented knowledge and the other evidence-based knowledge. We show how the project aiming at development of practice-oriented knowledge had relatively little legitimacy in NAV, did not lead to any significant changes in work practices in NAV, and caused considerable disappointment among the involved frontline workers because the new practices produced by the research were not converted into new work routines. Conversely, the project aiming at development of evidence-based knowledge enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy in NAV, led to implementation of new occupational roles and work practices, and aroused relatively little resistance by frontline workers. We believe that these differences suggest the existence of a hierarchy of knowledge in labour and welfare services, where evidence-based forms of knowledge and methods are regarded as more legitimate and appropriate than forms of knowledge placed ‘lower’ in the hierarchy. We end the paper with a discussion of the reasons for this hierarchy of knowledge and its implications for frontline labour and welfare services.

## **Knowledge and public service innovation**

### *Two understandings of knowledge*

Two broad types of knowledge legitimize professional services: practice-based knowledge and evidence-based knowledge. On the one hand, the concept of practice-base or experiential knowledge focuses on knowledge that takes into account the complex and dynamic settings in which frontline services take place (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Orlikowski, 2002). Rejecting

positivistic for more reflexive and practical epistemology, practice-based knowledge entails acknowledgement of frontline workers as subjects that experience and apply knowledge. Accordingly, its content may not mean the same to all involved. Furthermore, practice-based knowledge may often be developed in collaboration between researchers and practitioners and in connection with concrete development tasks (Lave & Wenger, 1991), for example through forms of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Such knowledge intersects ‘academic’ and ‘practical’ knowledge or ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ and hence may lead professionals to obtain the competence needed to apply theoretical principles to unique situations. At least in Norway, practical-based knowledge seems to be the dominant form in the professional education of social workers (Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2017), who constitute the dominant professional group in frontline labour and welfare services.

On the other hand, the concept of evidence-based knowledge focuses broadly on production of knowledge about the effects of specific interventions through meta-reviews or systematic reviews. Assessment of the strength of the evidence is a central feature in these reviews. Randomised and controlled trials (RCT) are typically placed at the top of the hierarchy, as a ‘gold standard’, and followed by quasi-experimental studies (level 2), before-and-after comparisons (level 3), cross-sectional studies (level 4), process evaluation, formative studies and action research (level 5), qualitative case studies (level 6), descriptive guides and examples of good practice (level 7) and user opinion (level 8) (Pawson, 2006: 49-50).

For frontline workers, evidence-based knowledge is manifested in work descriptions of interventions. These work descriptions may range from standardised manuals to a set of principles to be followed, and form the key instruments through which knowledge is converted into actual service practice. The central rationale for the manuals is that we need to improve the discretion of professionals and hence to simplify and systematise their work tasks with manuals or checklists. Some argue that professionals should use such manuals or checklists to structure their work because of the weaknesses inherent in human discretion (see Kirkebøen, 2008). Conversely, others talk about a “number and control group tyranny” and a “clash of cultures” that may threaten the autonomy of professionals (Hansen & Rieper, 2009; see also Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010).

*The collaborative dynamics of public service innovation*

The service development model in PKD emphasises collaboration between various stakeholders. This is consonant with ideas of collaborative innovation that have been growing in popularity across Europe in recent years (Bommert, 2010; Entwistle & Martin, 2005; Rashman et al., 2009; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). The notion of collaboration is indicative of a broad shift in public policies away from New Public Management (NPM) and its emphasis on sectoral specialisation and towards post-NPM or New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010) models involving networks and partnerships between public services and other actors (Hartley et al., 2013; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). The collaboration model rests on bringing together actors from different professional and institutional backgrounds to engage in “constructive management of differences in order to define common problems and develop joint solutions” (Hartley et al., 2013: 826).

This collaborative knowledge development model implies that knowledge in PKD is produced in social settings, through interaction between the various stakeholders involved, regardless of the type of knowledge produced (evidence-based or practice-based). The model poses new challenges to public administrations as control of knowledge-creation processes and responsibility for them is distributed among the collaborators. Rather than being in control of the knowledge development process, as in a more traditional bureaucratic or NPM model, collaboration requires “metagovernance” on behalf of public administrators (Jessop, 2011; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009), i.e. a balance between autonomous and bottom-up knowledge development and (top-down) control. According to Sørensen and Torfing, the key tools for metagovernance at the disposal of public administrators are political, discursive and financial framing (i.e. defining objectives and narratives); institutional design (i.e. arenas for collaboration); network facilitation (i.e. process management); and network participation (i.e. exerting an impact on output from collaboration). The central challenge faced by public administrations as metagovernors is thus how to strike the right balance between regulation and autonomy. In the context of knowledge development, this calls for a suitable balance between accepting, promoting and implementing the knowledge that is developed and the expectations and requirements of public authorities regarding that knowledge. As we will show, assertions about evidence-based and practice-based knowledge may tap directly into this balance between regulation and autonomy.

### **Empirical context: The PKD programme**

PKD was carried out in NAV in the period 2013-2016. It was financed and initiated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and based on experiences from a prior large-scale collaborative service innovation programme in the area of social services (the HUSK program, 2006-2011, see Andreassen, 2015; Austin & Johannessen, 2015; Johannessen, Natland, & Støkken, 2011). The NAV reform was initiated in 2006 and it merged the state employment and national insurance agencies with municipal social services. The merger was operationalised through establishment of local and frontline NAV offices in each municipality in Norway (2007-2010); these offices represented a partnership between the state (responsible for employment services) and each municipality (responsible for social services). However, over the years since the NAV reform, complete realisation of the partnership model has proved challenging, for example because it involves different professions/occupations (social work and activation workers), different office owners (the state and the municipalities), and different institutionalised practices and conceptions of appropriate knowledge at the NAV offices (Fossestøl, Breit, Andreassen, & Klemsdal, 2015). Also, the HUSK programme was criticised for focusing excessively on social services and thus not taking into account the employment- and activation-oriented services resulting from organisational changes in the NAV reform (Andreassen, 2015).

Furthermore, NAV has been criticized over the years for a lack of focus on employers, especially for the most vulnerable users, who require extensive services. This criticism has in part spurred increased emphasis in NAV on labour-oriented services for vulnerable citizens, of which ‘work inclusion’ or ‘place-then-train’ services, which focus on active use of employers and paid work, have been central (Berge & Falkum, 2013; Riesen, Morgan, & Griffin, 2015). This has for example involved research on Supported Employment, which is an intervention within the place-then-train paradigm (Frøyland & Spjelkavik, 2014; Nøkleby, Blaasvær, & Berg, 2017).

Hence, PKD can be understood as an attempt by the government to develop knowledge that first cuts across social and employment services and second prescribes how frontline workers can work more effectively with activation services and towards employers. According to the initial assignment by the Ministry, the efforts were to involve “projects initiated on the basis of local needs” and “contribute to knowledge-based practices and new forms of collaboration between research, education, NAV and users”.

PKD consisted of three county-level (regional) projects: WEST, EAST and NORTH (pseudonyms). Each project involved researchers, one or more university from the region, NAV

offices and selected frontline workers employed at these offices and citizens. The projects were formally owned by the regional authorities; the top administrative level in NAV (the NAV Directorate) was assigned the task of “coordinator”, with responsibility for the overall outcome of the programme, but with limited control over the actual collaborative processes. Research and development took place at designated NAV offices and involved selected frontline workers at these offices as well as citizens – either as formal representatives of client organisations or persons interested in participating in the research.

According to the call for projects, projects were free to choose an appropriate service method within the area of ‘work inclusion’. Furthermore, the projects were to draw on and develop established knowledge-based practices and use what were formulated as “scientific methods” to “contribute to new and testable knowledge” with “transfer value to other NAV offices”. As we will show, interpretations of these knowledge expectations and the outcomes of development of knowledge-based services varied greatly between the regional projects.

## **The study**

### *Data collection*

This study draws on various types of qualitative data collected as part of an official evaluation of the PKD program in the period from January 2015 to September 2017. The data consist of the following material: first, interviews and group interviews with frontline workers at the NAV offices, representatives of the NAV county division, representatives of client organisations and researchers. We conducted the interviews in three rounds: about half way through the projects (spring 2015); towards the end of the projects (summer 2016); and after the projects were finished (spring 2017). In total, we collected 83 individual and group interviews. Table 1 provides details about the interviews.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Second, there are written reports from the three projects. These reports include a) initial project descriptions finalized at the start of the projects; b) preliminary sub-reports produced about half way into the projects; and c) final reports from the projects. The purpose of the reports was to document the analyses and outcomes of the projects.

Third, there were interviews with the four main representatives of the NAV Directorate. We conducted the interviews at two intervals – firstly individual interviews approximately half way

through the programme (autumn 2015) and secondly a group interview with all of the representatives after the programme had been finalized (spring 2017). We also had several meetings with the project group in the directorate, in addition to dialogue during several presentations of the (preliminary results) as well as informal conversations at network conferences, where we discussed our interpretations of the data.

Fourth, participant observations were made at three network conferences involving all members of the three projects.

### *Analysis*

We analysed our research question – i.e. how notions of appropriate knowledge impact service innovation – with a comparative case analysis approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2013). We operationalised the regional projects as specific cases and examined the differences across the three projects and the mechanisms underlying the differences. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on two of the three projects because they illustrate the two extremes, or “polar types” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007: 27), evidence-based and practice-based knowledge. The third project involved more complex combinations of the two forms of knowledge. The final evaluation report also contains a detailed description of the third project (E. Breit, Fossetøl, Pedersen, & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017).

In the analysis, we examined the following elements: (a) the type of knowledge that the projects sought to develop, using the interviews, reports and observations; (b) how well the knowledge developed met the expectations of the participants, i.e. their degree of (dis)satisfaction with the knowledge and the methods and analyses employed, drawing on the interview data with the project members and the NAV Directorate; (c) how disagreements regarding knowledge output were handled, also drawing on the interview data; (d) the outcomes of the regional projects regarding knowledge-based practices, drawing on the project reports and interview material. The reports were particularly useful in this analysis as they all contained distinct chapters on the degree and type of implementation of the project results. To gain some control over possible bias in the project management’s own descriptions of their results, we also used our final round of interviews to explore the extent of the implementation as understood by the project members themselves; and (e) The experiences of using mainly frontline workers regarding the outcomes of the projects, i.e. implementation of new practices, the interview material with the frontline workers. The main results of the analysis are summarised in table 1.

--- Table 2 about here ---

As part of the analytical process, we wrote extended reports on each of the three projects and distributed them to the project participants. Although we acknowledge the fundamental subjectivity of our claims and interpretations, we nevertheless believe that we have a decent understanding of the projects and their outcomes.

## **Analysis of the projects**

### *WEST: Practice-based knowledge*

The overall objective of the WEST project was to reduce the number of young clients (aged 25-30) on disability pensions. Concern on the part of the NAV county division about the large number of such clients was the reason for this focus. Two NAV offices were involved in the project, which involved examination of the application of two established work assessment methods adapted from health and drugs services, one at each NAV office. The project included establishment of a user forum at the two NAV offices and collaboration with the university regarding student awareness of NAV.

The project sought to develop practical knowledge on the use and experience of the two assessment methods frontline workers and clients. According to the final report, the epistemological focus was on “knowledge that contains participant orientation and action orientation”. This focus was achieved, for example, by “explicating tacit knowledge” and exploring how “to implement it [the knowledge] in practice” (WEST, final report, p. 13-14).

The strong link between the project and social work was a key reason for the focus on practical knowledge. Many of the frontline workers at the NAV offices who participated in the project were social workers and both the educational institution and the researchers represented social work. The emphasis on social work was realised methodologically by using micro-level interview and observational data with frontline workers and clients and highlighting detailed narrative analyses of the data. Development of client participation at NAV also had priority and contributed to the emphasis on social work: “We had a slightly different approach [than the other two projects]. We thought we had to be faithful to client participation, and we have kept that focus” (Researcher).

Throughout the project, the frontline workers, researchers and clients found the collaboration positive. The researchers collaborated closely with the frontline workers, who played the role

of “co-researchers” – i.e. working as prescribed by the methods, collecting data, and participating in discussions with the researchers about the methods. The role of co-researcher was appreciated by the counsellors, as in the following example:

In the first phase it was a bit chaotic. Who was supposed to do what? But then [the researchers] became more involved, and I thought it was exciting when they were in the office. We have gradually approached each other and developed really good collaboration. We have gotten better at asking for what we need and they are more proactive towards us (Frontline worker).

A key reason for this positive experience is arguably the opportunity to work according to a logic of ‘pure’ (social work) professionalism (Eric Breit, Fossetøl, & Andreassen, 2017; Noordegraaf, 2007). This social work professionalism has generally been difficult to maintain at the NAV offices because of the strong influence of an administrative mode of work, which has emphasized performance management over professional (social work) competence (see Røysum, 2013).

However, despite positive experiences at the micro level, there was also disagreement between the NAV county division and the researchers during the project. The county division wanted to know whether the assessment methods had or did not have an effect on the number of young disability pension clients in the county. The county division reported considerable scepticism regarding the micro and narrative-oriented research design and also the findings; this scepticism was based on the contention that the studies did not provide sufficient documentation on the impact of the methods. This position is exemplified in the following quote:

If the researchers could document more convincingly that this [method] works better, and not just because the counsellors have fewer users, then this would be important to us. But you live on a different planet if you think NAV will get their budget quadrupled, and that is the only way it will work (Manager in NAV county division).

On the other hand, the researchers argued against using a more evidence-oriented approach because it did not capture the complexity entailed in practical use of the methods. Because they believed that “there is no quick fix” regarding interpretation and operationalization of findings regarding cause and effect, the researchers did not want to conduct an effect study. The following is an example of their position:

Effects, we are asked about them all the time. When you talk about effects, you need to measure them against something. And they [the NAV county division] have not taken into account that this is a qualitative study. [...] Not that an RCT [randomised controlled study] wouldn't be useful, but our focus was to explore the methods, so an RCT design wouldn't have been appropriate (WEST, Research leader).

The disagreements between the NAV county division and the researchers in the project led to increasingly isolation from the central administration, i.e. both the county division and the directorate. This isolation was possible in part because the University acted in the capacity of project manager, and in part because the NAV county division, as one of the two partner owners (together with the County General), distanced itself from the owner role. This meant minimising their involvement in the project and the number of meetings they attended. Moreover, the researchers were wary of help from the directorate, which they felt was trying to alter the project design in the wrong direction. The researchers felt that they were providing important and useful knowledge and wanted to carry on with their research despite criticism and efforts to alter the course of the project.

The project did not lead to any significant implementation of new practices at the NAV offices. This was due to a lack of support from the NAV county division and also to limited scope and interest on the part of NAV offices for allocating resources of their own to continue working as they had done in the project. The most substantial result of the project was establishment of the youth client participation forum, which later aroused interest in other NAV areas. This forum had high priority in the project and also received some support from other areas in NAV.

At the end of the project, the frontline workers in the participating NAV offices reported disappointment with the project outcomes. Although they were satisfied with being 'co-researchers' in the projects, at the same time they experienced dissonance as the project did not lead to substantial changes at the offices. They attributed some of the challenges to the researchers' lack of substantial knowledge about the NAV system:

In retrospect, you could think [the researchers] should have spent more time [in the office] in getting an overview of how things work around here. It got very narrow. [...] A lot was new to them, and I'm unsure how much of the bigger picture they understood (Frontline worker).

In addition, the frontline workers were frustrated at having ‘to return to normal’ after the project had ended. This ‘normality’ involved deteriorated conditions for their clients, as their portfolio was expanded:

I know the feeling; before and after the project: ‘yes, you were in the project but now it’s back to everyday life in NAV’. I have been told a number of times that ‘yes, we know that close and individual follow-up helps, but now the project is over’.

### *EAST: Evidence-based knowledge*

The main objective of the EAST project was to conduct an RCT study of Supported Employment in NAV. Supported Employment is an umbrella term for various interventions focusing on different client groups (Bond, 2004; Drake, Bond, & Becker, 2012; Nøkleby et al., 2017). A common element is strong emphasis on active use of ordinary employment as an arena for vocational rehabilitation, according to the ‘place-then-train’ approach. Another common element is the use of ‘employment specialists’ or ‘job coaches’, who provide close support to clients and employers. The project was carried out in two counties and at four NAV offices (two in each county), operating as test arenas for the study. It was managed by researchers from a nearby University College.

The project was based on the assertion that knowledge about the effects of Supported Employment in the Norwegian context was lacking. There has been increasing focus on use of Supported Employment in the labour and welfare authority in recent years, as part of an attempt to insource parts of Supported Employment that had previously been handled almost entirely by external providers. Hence, in order to legitimate this insourcing process, there was a pre-existing focus on the need for evidence about Support Employment in NAV. More specifically, the focus on Supported Employment in the project originated from one of the participating NAV offices that had been interested in the method for some time and wanted to know how they could apply it at NAV.

Hence the epistemological and methodological design applied by the EAST project was significantly different than that of the WEST project, as the emphasis in the former was on studying the possible impact of Supported Employment. The EAST project also interpreted the directorate’s call for projects differently than the WEST project. The EAST project primarily understood that the call concerned a need for knowledge on methods that would involve

employers more actively in work inclusion efforts. This perception of the role of the employers and of ordinary workplaces has been a central divider between NAV and social work traditions in Norway that have generally been more closely affiliated with a ‘train-then-place’ approach (Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2017). Like the researchers in WEST, the researchers in EAST had limited knowledge of NAV and of Supported Employment in particular. The overall design and work organisation of the project meant that the researchers helped to produce the ‘evidence’.

Unlike the WEST project, the EAST project did not experience disagreement between participants. The frontline workers, the NAV county division, the clients and the researchers basically agreed on the epistemological focus of the project and methods. Hence there was an higher degree of consensus in the project regarding the knowledge to be generated; it revolved around development of evidence-based knowledge regarding Supported Employment in general and the concrete work practices and organisation of the job specialists in particular.

Accordingly, most participants in the project reported positive experiences. The front line workers underlined that – as in the WEST project – the East project provided them with an opportunity to follow up clients more closely than normal. They were also able to use their skill to make contact with employers and thus to work outside the NAV office to a considerable extent. They were generally highly motivated to work in the intervention, of which the following is a typical example:

We want to be allowed to keep working [Supported Employment]; we see that it has a purpose. We believe in this. We want our NAV office to get additional funding so that NAV (central administration) will realize that [Supported Employment] should be part of the frontline services. We have learned a lot that we can hopefully put to good use further on. (Frontline worker)

At the same time, frontline workers were skeptical about the extra reporting required for the RCT. This was caused by the fidelity analyses, which sought to determine the extent to which they actually worked according to the intervention. They were also skeptical about interfaces with other ‘ordinary’ frontline workers at the NAV office, who were supposed to refer some of their clients to the Supported Employment intervention. The likelihood that the client would be randomised for the control group, and thus first become motivated to participate in ordinary employment only to hear that they would receive follow-up work as before, was a key reason for not doing so.

I know some counsellors don't refer clients to us because they are afraid they will be randomised into the control group and experience another setback. They don't seem to understand the reason behind control groups. But if you just get proper research, you have a leg to stand on later on [in convincing others of the impact of Supported Employment]. (Frontline worker)

In contrast to the WEST project, the EAST project also involved a fruitful relationship with the county division and directorate. The county division was clearly interested in developing the 'evidence' for Supported Employment, but also in more specific terms in developing a common understanding and language across the NAV offices, which they saw as having previously been relatively unsystematic:

To get common words, terms, professionalism, to help us systematically develop our knowledge. That NAV offices, county, researchers and clients can talk together, and agree on what kind of knowledge is needed, what the actual knowledge is and how it's relevant in practice (Representative of the NAV county division).

The county division considered a closer connection with the researchers at the University College useful; they had previously had limited cooperation with them regarding labour and welfare knowledge. Hence, in a broader sense, the project also became part of a regional strategy for NAV and the University College. The directorate, in turn, emphasised the positive experiences of collaboration. A member of the directorate put it like this:

EAST worked together with us, they were curious. It was team play, they made use of our competence and we had a dialogue. And we learnt a lot about steering and [...] dialogue-based project development in this process (Member of the Directorate).

Also, the clients considered the EAST project successful, according to a separate report focusing on client participation. Client participation is one of the central dimensions in the Supported Employment interventions and clients have – like in WEST – been involved in the administrative functions of the project. In addition, the researchers attempted to involve the clients in the project in development by having them act as 'co-researchers' and participate in the client forum, but this was less successful as there were problems in securing the attendance of clients at subsequent meetings, especially if they had received job offers.

The EAST project has entailed a relatively high degree of implementation, first and foremost by employing Supported Employment job specialists at the participating NAV offices. Most of

the offices decided to reallocate funds and hire additional job specialists. Some of the participating NAV offices also received additional funding from the ministry as part of broader insourcing processes, which further contributed to implementation of the experience gained from the project. In addition to knowledge for the job specialists, EAST also developed a learning system – focusing on the type of competence needed to perform and implement Supported Employment I NAV offices – that was tested and implemented at the NAV offices throughout the project.

### **Discussion of the findings: The impact of a knowledge hierarchy on service innovation**

As we have seen, the design, processual development and implementation of new practices differed considerably between the EAST and the WEST projects. On the one hand, the EAST project led to implementation of new occupational roles and new work practices at the NAV offices. The success of the EAST project can be attributed to close consonance between the epistemological and methodological legitimacy of the project at NAV, which was achieved not only by developing ‘evidence’ around new methods, but also by strengthening knowledge about work inclusion or a ‘place-then-train’ approach, which constitutes the focus of policy and organisational attention at NAV. The project met limited resistance precisely because it suited the broader institutional changes so well, even though there was some criticism from frontline workers regarding the design and focus.

On the other hand, the WEST project did not lead to any significant changes in the work practices at NAV – even though it did lead to new understanding of youth participation. Despite an apparent alliance between frontline workers, clients and the researchers, the strong focus on practical and experiential knowledge, which was closely connected with social work, proved to be a central challenge for the project. Even though the knowledge developed had substantial legitimacy and a strong foothold in the field of social work in Norway (Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2017), it was generally rejected by NAV, both on the county level and centrally.

These two very different project trajectories are interesting because they raise the question of the impact of the knowledge hierarchy at NAV on the types of services most appropriate for development. The methods used in RCT studies, which are high in the knowledge hierarchy, are generally considered ‘gold standard’ (see e.g., Pawson, 2006: 49; Timmermans & Berg, 2010). Further down the hierarchy one can find process evaluations, formative studies and action research like those undertaken in the WEST project. Judging from these two projects, an

epistemological orientation perceived to be lower in the knowledge hierarchy will, in the end, mean less legitimacy for the knowledge developed. By extension, the risk of questions and negative assessments regarding the studies and methods employed will be higher.

The concept of a knowledge hierarchy has traditionally been associated with the health domain. Our analysis also raises the question of whether the impact of a knowledge hierarchy on assessment of research and service development is also being transferred to labour and welfare services. Although use of a knowledge hierarchy in a field more focused on natural science is understandable, it is not necessarily unproblematic when it becomes equally influential in the field of labour and welfare, which is within the realm of the social sciences. Although it is not likely that the knowledge hierarchy will obtain the standing it has in healthcare, it may eventually lead to a greater variety of knowledge forms, and not merely to processual and formative research, but also to forms of evidence-based knowledge and practice.

In this emerging context of evidence hierarchy, frontline service agencies such as the NAV offices are forced to assess and navigate different – and at times conflicting – knowledge demands. A conflict of this kind is particularly evident in WEST. Participants in the project confronted a strong research milieu focusing on micro and process-oriented social work. At the same time, they were required by the central authorities to further develop a type of knowledge that differs from the one they initially set out to develop together with the researchers. Another conflict involves the types of practices deemed most legitimate, i.e. evidence-based interventions and the use of manuals and routines on the one hand, and professional experience and discretion on the other.

Importantly, these knowledge discussions are not only taking place on the level of project administration, but also impact on the frontline workers. In our study, this impact was especially evident in the WEST project, where the two participating NAV offices found themselves in the middle of a discussion between the researchers and the NAV county level on research design. The frontline workers reported feeling powerless when the research to which they had contributed was criticised or deemed irrelevant by their own organisation.

Finally, the analysis of the challenges in the WEST project is relatively simplistic and there are also other contributing factors. For instance, in defending their critique of the WEST project, the directorate and the NAV county division argued that they were critical of the quality of the analyses and not of the research design. The problem was thus framed as one of underdeveloped research and not one of the ‘wrong’ research design. Yet, from an outside evaluator’s

perspective, many of the analyses were of adequate quality and would seem to have some relevance for NAV and development of their services. Hence, these interpretations showcase the complex interconnections between the perceived ‘rigour’ and ‘relevance’ (cf. Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006) of the knowledge developed in PKD. An important observation from this study is thus that it is often difficult to clearly distinguish between criticism directed at the quality of the research and criticism directed at the epistemological and/or methodological orientation of the research in these kinds of collaborative efforts.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, we have focused on the legitimacy of certain forms of knowledge in service development processes. We have shown how these development processes may involve differing assessments of appropriate knowledge among the institutional actors involved and hence constrain the collaboration processes and outcomes in various ways. According to our empirical analysis of the NORTH and EAST projects, the legitimacy of evidence-based knowledge and the related illegitimacy of more formative and processual studies in the realm of social work have been obvious. This suggests that the question of knowledge legitimacy arguably plays a key – and yet understudied – role in such service innovation processes.

Our study raises questions regarding the impact of a knowledge hierarchy on the development of services in the labour and welfare sector and an apparently greater impact of evidence-based knowledge in service areas traditionally dominated by practice-based knowledge. We echo Ferlie et al.’s (2013: 192) emphasis on the importance of addressing the nature of knowledge itself in order to bridge the gap between different institutionalised understandings of knowledge in service development efforts. While there is considerable (and growing) understanding of the collaborative dynamics between stakeholders with different understandings of objectives and means (Bommert, 2010; Torfing, 2016), there is less knowledge about the implications of epistemological differences and how they can be handled. Although pursuit of different types of knowledge seems to be an obvious strategy for development of holistic and integrated services to solve “wicked problems”, there is also the risk that some forms of knowledge may become ‘more equal than others’ and hence narrow the composition of knowledge in the services (see Pawson, 2006).

Our experiences indicate that different tasks require different types of knowledge in labour and welfare services. Implementation of evidence-based interventions with fidelity scales requires another form of knowledge than efforts to mobilise user participation. Hence no necessary or absolute opposites between practice-based and evidence based knowledge apparently exist. The challenge for collaborative efforts in service innovation therefore seems to be one of recognizing the relevance of different types and standings of knowledge and of clarifying what type of knowledge is needed under different circumstances.

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**Table 1: Details about the interviews**

	2015	2016	2017
NAV county level	3	5	4
NAV office managers	4	7	6
NAV frontline workers	6	8	7
Researchers	6	7	5
County General	4	3	1
Representatives of client organisations	2	3	1
N=83	26	33	24

**Table 2: Overview of the two studied projects**

	WEST	EAST
Objectives	Develop methods to reduce the number of young clients on disability pensions.	Document whether Supported Employment has a positive impact on work inclusion.
Type of knowledge developed	Practice-oriented social work knowledge	Evidence-based knowledge on more active use of employers and ordinary workplaces
Disagreements due to differing knowledge expectations on the part of participants (NAV, researchers, clients)	Considerable disagreements: NAV critical of the lack of focus on evidence (“what works”).	No disagreement
Handling of disagreements	Isolation of the researchers. Limited practical collaboration.	-
Implementation of knowledge-based services	No implementation	High degree of implementation
Experiences of the frontline workers regarding project outcomes	Positive experiences about the process. Disappointment due to lack of recognition and implementation.	Generally positive experiences. Some criticism due to interference with ongoing projects.