

**The future of the welfare state: paths of social policy  
innovation between constraints and opportunities**

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**Dialogued based activation – a new dispositif?**

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## Introduction

In most European countries the so-called *individual action plan* (IAP) has become a major policy instrument in providing active welfare for social benefit claimants (OECD, 2001, 2007). An IAP is a written contractual-style signed “agreement” between the welfare recipient and the welfare agency, which explicitly accounts for the content and purpose of activation. As such, the IAP outlines the action to be taken by the client and the commitment of the welfare agency. A characteristic feature of the IAP is that it is based on a dialogue (or negotiations) between the client and the case worker/the system. During this dialogue the needs and wishes of the individual in question are to be articulated, which allegedly allow for individualised and tailor made service provisions. Thus, the IAP is generally aimed at creating or restoring the individual’s relationship to – and integration in – the labour market. The IAP is grounded in the notion that there are actually two parties that can and will mutually oblige one another in the form of a contract.

The IAP interview can be regarded as an opportunity to clarify the possible measures in relation to an employment-focused perspective. According to this optic, the IAP interview involves a “learning-to-labour” perspective. Furthermore, the IAP contract may be viewed as a technology supporting individualisation of service provisions (e.g. Borghi and van Berkel, 2007), and that individuals are increasingly becoming “co-owners” of how their problems are defined and solved, i.e. citizens progressively become responsible for their own lives (e.g. Handler, 2003). The new technology is also linked to the formation of new types of governance (e.g. Bredgaard and Larsen, 2008) and that a participatory or administrative (more democratic) citizenship is emerging (e.g. Born and Jensen, 2005). And it may be viewed as a technology which helps to solve social problems, as user involvement and governance most probably makes social services more effective (e.g. Osborne and Gaebler, 1993).

In this paper, however, the aim is not to analyse the IAP contract as a new and path-breaking problem solving technology in social policy. Rather, the aim is to analyse the generic features of the IAP seen as a technology that accelerates the creation of the self-reflexive decision-maker in late modern society. Thus, the IAP interview takes its point of departure in the jobseeker’s situation, including the person’s interests and abilities, and the IAP builds on the premise that the individual articulates her interests in a self-reflexive manner. Accordingly, our aim is to explore the microphysics of the IAP dialogue and its possible societal implications, and the article is subdivided into three parts.

In the first part of the article we make a diagnostic exercise as to how an IAP can be understood. In this exercise we do not touch upon whether the IAP actually leads to long-term employment – or not. This is beyond the aims of this article. Rather, we are interested in the IAP as a phenomenon. Thus, the aim is to search for the basic dynamics and internal features of the IAP dialogue, and our main claim is that the IAP from a Foucauldian perspective may be described as a self-technology. In the second part we analyse the contextual framework of the IAP. It is argued that IAP (and Human Resource Management) dialogues increasingly have become prevalent in the post-industrialised society. That is, the IAP dialogue represents a general phenomenon in society extending far beyond the domain of social policy. In this perspective the IAP is not just a new technology. It is thus argued, that the logics of the IAP has been internalised as a new *dispositif*; i.e. a rationality reaching far beyond the status of an optional technology. In the third and final part we reflect upon challenges floating from dialogue based interactions in the post-industrial society. These are that the self-technology is asymmetrical, but that the “tool-box” of the “administrator” is reduced to suggestions – rather than commands. In effect, success criteria’s (for social policy) erode from inside, as success criteria’s are negotiable or out-comes of negotiations (between the client and

case-worker). From a sociological perspective the result is that exclusion and marginalisation become collectively invisible in the self-creative and self-expressive post-industrial society.

### ***Part One: Deconstructing the IAP interview***

When activation – or the action to be taken – is an out-come of negotiations, the service provisions provided by the welfare state are no longer “externally” guaranteed as universal rights and obligations. By contrast, the provision of benefits depends on the ability and willingness of the welfare recipient to engage in a dialogue, including the ability to construct and present oneself as being one who is worthy of future oriented investments. In effect, the epicentre for political decision making about the distribution of resources in society has shifted. The IAP interview has become a policy-forming as well as a policy-implementing arena. This contributes to the erosion of the traditional distinction in industrial society between employment and unemployment, or inclusion and exclusion. In stead, new lines of demarcation emerge between those who are willing and able to be their own entrepreneur in a constructive manner and those who are irrelevant, i.e. a person society does not deem necessary to sacrifice resources on, and who can be excluded from the welfare state benefits system without further adieu. Refusing to participate in the IAP interview in a constructive manner usually leads to a loss of unemployment or welfare benefits for a shorter or longer period of time. The IAP interview might thus be labelled a “fatal moment” (Giddens, 1991), which involves both opportunities and risks.

#### *Logics of the IAP interview*

The IAP interview institutionalizes new expectations to the subjects, namely that they are to be reflexive and responsible for themselves, which involves a new type of *identity production*. The IAP institutionalizes certain expectations as to how the individual person is to be and act. The unemployed individual has to consider herself as an object to be formed or constructed anew. As such, the IAP has an impact on the internal subjectivation processes. It is the very ability to plan and act which becomes the admission ticket to service provisions in the post-industrial society. The dialogue and planning activities determine whether the unemployed individual is enrolled in the activation apparatus in the welfare state.

The IAP meeting may be described as strategic. The relations between action, language and experience are brought to the forefront, which is further accompanied by a profound shift in the logics of the state-citizen relationship: from a passive and legalistic (obligations and rights) relationship, to a creative and participatory (strategy and negotiation) relationship, and this change operates in at least two dimensions simultaneously: it affects our concepts and classificatory schemes of perception, and it affects our notion of causality.

First, there is a change in the relationship between classificatory concepts and their social references. Universal categories (e.g. “work”) dissolve and re-emerge with new and shifting significance through the negotiations, so that the meaning of words and concepts is established and transformed through these negotiation processes (what signifies work, internship and improved skills is determined through negotiations). For instance, it may be agreed upon that participation in a future workshop is defined as subsidised work, and in turn qualify for unemployment benefits. Instead of being based on institutions and taken for granted the semantics and contents of the concepts result from the negotiations and are therefore re-negotiable in the next and following dialogue.

Second, there are also changes in how labour market opportunities are perceived. In the industrial society, the cause-and-effect relationship could be understood on a linear time axis,

where the conditions for the future almost necessarily depended on past actions. For instance, training or education acquired in the past delineated future prospects. The encounter between the system and the client often revolved around information and the placement of responsibility and guilt (“self-inflicted” or “self-induced”). In the IAP dialogue, however, where the subject is continuously constructed and reconstructed, the relationship between past and future changes from being a necessary cause-and-effect relationship to being a manipulable variable. The imagined and planned future thus defines what becomes the relevant past (Sennett (1998) speaks of the winners as those who are able to manipulate their past), which has consequences for the very negotiation process.

During the IAP dialogue and negotiation process, the subjects that are to be activated or engaged in career planning can never be certain whether it is their abilities as negotiating subjects or their actual plans that are in play and at stake. The time horizon of the dialogue is therefore only future-oriented as long as the administrator believes in the counterpart’s negotiating abilities, i.e. believes that the individual in question has a realistic self-perception and is able to manage what is being planned. Should the manager or social worker begin to doubt, the past takes over and the administrator might begin to question the subject’s capacity. Consider, for example, a 53-year-old man who has had problems with alcohol, dropped out of school in seventh grade and has been out of work for the last 17 years. If he starts talking about an interest in teaching upper secondary school, he is seemingly displaying a lack of insight regarding his own abilities, and the caseworker might begin to question his capacity as negotiating subject; i.e. his capacities as a self-entrepreneur are questioned – he is deemed irrelevant.

The past-future relationship can be defined or redefined in any dialogue at any level. The power to define the past-future relationship is, however, unevenly distributed between the client and the caseworker. This uneven balance is not just because the one part possesses the resources and right to judge. The uneven balance is linked to a fundamental feature that renders the actual interview about development and planning meaningful to begin with, i.e. the self-technology which is in play.

### *The IAP interview as self-technology*

When the world and its participants are created in the conversation about who/what is relevant and what is to be done, a distinctive universe emerges in which something is at once made given and malleable. On the one side emerges the place from which the plan gives meaning and on the other side the plan itself, and these two sides are so closely connected that it becomes difficult to assess what determines success or failure. This forces the individual rationality even further away from the classic decision-making rationality towards what Luhmann refers to as the new rationality, i.e. future-oriented risk assessment, in which even the risk connected to making decisions at all is at play in the dialogues and decisions, regardless of whether you are inside or outside of the labour market (Luhmann, 1991).

By focusing on dialogue as an occasion to create an identity, the interview becomes a positively charged opportunity for self-reflection. Regarded as a technology, this also indicates a solid shift in the self-technologies in general. Here, “self-technologies” refers to the ways we typically can observe ourselves and act in relation to ourselves (Foucault, 1988). The fundamental self-technological concept in industrial society was the classic Greek “know thyself”, while the post-industrial “translation” would be more in terms of “care for the self” (Townley, 1995). In the self-technology “know thyself”, the individual is understood as a stable unit and the dialogues focuses on this stability and deviations from the stability. The methods will typically be the clinical and control-oriented intervention of e.g. the care-giver, therapist or social worker. The technology

in “care for the self” builds upon an alternative conception of the self. Here, the self is a movement, an ongoing handling of the relationship between the past and the future for the individual – within the individuals themselves. In the late-stoic spirit, this is about registering what you are interested in doing, what you actually did and then consider the reasons for and implications of what has been done. In this process, the self emerges as an output of and input to the very same process (Foucault, 1986, 1988; Townley, 1995, 1998).

The IAP dialogue creates the individual as a responsible self-observer, who acts upon him/herself; the individual is thus allocated autonomy together with new rights and obligations. The new rights and obligations are not just about getting a job; it is also very much about relating to how one relates to a job. Giddens has spoken about “politics of second chances” as an integrated element in life-policy arrangements (Giddens, 1994). The IAP and IAP interviews are an actualisation of “politics of second chances”. In our optics it is, however, not about the individual being able to try over and over again. Instead, the politics of second chances means that you receive a new chance to present or narrate yourself in a new manner in forms which makes you a participant in a dialogue leading to a social contract. It is a new occasion to do what we all are doing, i.e. to create and maintain an identity through the reproduction and renewal of the autobiographical narrative. In this perspective, the differences crumble between IAP interviews and other Human Resource Management (HRM) interviews on the ordinary labour market. Increasingly, the dialogue tends to appear as a generalized condition for the actual participation in society. It is in the amalgamation of self-technology and liability as negotiator that the new subjectivity assumes form; a form that makes “co-ownership” in policy formation and implementation attainable and desirable – or even pleasurable; the gist of becoming subject.

### ***Part two: The context of the IAP logics***

Reflexive and dialogue-based IAP’s are not a narrow phenomenon practised in the activation industry alone. IAP’s have spread horizontally in a viral manner to practically all areas of life. Within the welfare state apparatus the IAP is not confined to social and labour market policies; IAP’s are also common features in areas such as, for instance, the school and healthcare system. On the ‘ordinary’ labour market IAP-like dialogues have gained footing as so-called employee-development interviews, while every second programme on television seems to include self-presentation and reality-negotiations of the self. It should therefore hardly be controversial to argue that the form and machinery of the IAP dialogue is generalised. The IAP represents a general shift towards individualization and system-induced reflexivity, where the self emerges in the continual observation and presentation of the self as a self, and dialogue and contracts are precisely the dominant media in which self-observation and self-presentation might be actualized.

In other words, Human Resource Management (HRM) has become a widespread management philosophy, which focuses on the development of the employees, strategies for the individual, career planning, competency development and other relevant tools for the development of the self (Spencer and Spencer, 1991; Beardwell and Holden 1997). These technologies have found their way into most public and private workplaces, where the personnel are called into annual interviews with the management. In these performance interviews the individual’s strong and weak sides are addressed in order to stimulate reflection with respect to relevant ambitions, skills, competencies, and opportunities. In such performance assessments, the language created by the industrialization and collectivization (“we would like”, “we demand” etc) has ceased to be useful. Instead, a new idiom is used – the self-strategizing language. By using this idiom, the employees

can articulate that they, as individuals, have defined as objective to get from A to B in X number of days; and it is in this very plan that they establish the contours of themselves<sup>1</sup>.

The form and content of these HRM interviews for career plans are homologous to the IAP interview. They are future-oriented dialogues, where dialogue-related power is constituted in the modal form of planning, but where both parties find themselves in situations of mutual dependency. The employer/social worker controls the economic dimension. If the citizen/client/wage earner can or will not, the proverbial cheque book is closed. Conversely, the citizen/client/wage earner possesses an expertise, which in its own right is also a form of power; they are the experts in their own lives and conceptions about the future, which the employer/social worker depends upon if there is to be any contract.

Regarded as dialogue, the interaction is nevertheless marked by deep asymmetry. The asymmetry in these interviews is not due to the participants' institutional affiliations alone (civil servant in a bureaucracy vs. citizen/client), but due to the self-technology implied in the interview: the development of the interviewees themselves. The one part acts as a "role-in-action" (a manager/social worker), while the other is the actual topic of the interview (that which is being talked about and is to be activated). On the one side sits a system administrator, who can step in and out of the role. On the other side sits a participant (a self-strategist?), who becomes a subject in the moment she deals with herself as an object. This subject can only become the bearer of a role as a client/wage earner on the condition that her expertise about herself is accepted as the basis for the interview.

It thus seems as if there are logics recurring in both the ordinary labour market and the "activation market". Both performance interviews and IAPs are about self-reflection. The two areas draw upon the same language and same objectives for the negotiations. Both types of arenas require deliberate and reflexive participation on the social level, and self-reflection and the accompanying self-promotion are necessary requirements. You only become a subject and individual via self-observation and dialogue, and we all can and must be constantly redefined. The sequential individualization is the machine that gets everything running, while the dialogue, planning and contract represent the technologies. In the background, an ideal of voluntarism, strategic participation, and risk-running obviously lurks as a life form, as the topic of the interactions become where, how far and at what price (Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998; Beck, 2000; Baumann, 2001, 2003)?

### *On the way to a new dispositif*

The IAP – or IAP-like interview – expresses a new structural condition for human activity. Increasingly, capable people must act as subjects that are flexible and continuously able to present themselves in new ways through a self-technology that can be labelled as "care for thyself" in what we may call the Human Resource Management society. On the steering level, this obviously requires the decentralization and individualization of the political competencies; a transition from detail steering and rule steering to management by objectives, as well as the emergence of dialogue and negotiations in social work. These changes also manifest themselves as a new type of citizenship, where participation instead of rights and obligations has become a basic political concept; that the citizen is actively included in the casework and the exercise of authority renders the individual subject the master over their own self-creation (Born and Jensen, 2005).

These couplings between institutions, mechanisms and logics are precisely what Foucault called a dispositif. The dispositif concept directs the attention towards the regularities permeating arguments and actions. The regularities do not determine the actions, but they provide support to a number of arguments and actions, while at the same time others are weakened. The

regularities indicate that a given phenomenon in a given epoch, e.g. the IAP interview, is easier to articulate than other phenomena (e.g. external force). In other words, dispositifs are not provided by nature. They are historical and local and can therefore be both phased out and developed (Foucault, 1975; Raffnsøe et al., 2008), and yet they take the character of compulsive logics when actualised; a dispositif is a dominant form of rationality.

IAP indicates a new dispositive. Instead of the panoptic observation and the disciplinary mechanisms that belonged to the industrial society, where they had solid support in schools, universities, institutions, hospitals etc, we now find an array of interviews and networks running both transversely through the known institutions as well as circumventing them. Not in the form of external sanctioned institutions, but as self evident internalised modalities. The new development implies that the disciplining has been internalized in the individual as self-discipline; not merely as a means to adaptation, but as the very condition for the existence-in-the-world. Instead of disciplining with reference to an absolute (God or human reason), it occurs as actualized subjectivation, where the individual is doubled in an observing self, who uses planning technologies, and a self as object. Instead of the panoptical prison based on the surveillance economy, we are currently living in a synopticon, where the actual surveillance and citizenship are privatized and associated with the communication economy: choose yourself, choose your social reference, express yourself, and leave the active second-order support to the public policies (Giddens, 1991; Deleuze, 2006).

Referring to themes that we have touched upon during the text we might schematise our assertions in the following way:

	Industrial society	HRM society	IAP society
Subjectivity	Position in coordinate system	Reflexive action	Strategic creation
Self-technology	Know thyself	Care for thyself	Express thyself
Casework form	Judicial decision/commando	Dialogue and negotiations	Dialogue and suggestions
Steering	Rule steering	Management by objectives	Asymmetric trial and error
Institutional foundation	Externalised in classificatory organisations	Externalised in transportable models and procedures	Internalised as existential mode
Success criteria	Wage labour	Development of competence	Negotiable (?)
Dispositif	Discipline and law	Risk and contract	??????????????

The point of this schema is not to summarise findings, but to indicate generic differences and to suggest internal relations between elements bordering to the status of dispositif. The different dispositifs are not successive rationalities even if different epochs might favour one over another (Foucault, 2007). With respect to our argument until now we will argue that the IAP interview display traits pointing towards the line between the HRM society and something yet to find its forms. The traits are deeply connected to new forms of subjectivity, where the ongoing strategic self creation is the core of existence no matter whether the forum is public policy or market consumption. From this shift follows new sets of conditions and challenges for interaction in general and steering in particular, which also gives rise to new types of questions and challenges, such as: from where to establish criteria for success?

Accepting that IAP is not just another governance technology, but expresses an emerging rationality, and accepting that collectivisation and henceforth collective political and/or ethical action is not the immediate rational answer within the dispositif, there is no self evident place from where to criticise the emerging dialogue based and steered society.

### ***Reflexions***

In this article we have argued that the IAP is an asymmetrical self-technology, which has been generalised. There is – so to speak – a structural homology between the IAP, on the one hand, and HRM dialogues practiced in all corners of society, on the other, which indicates that a new dispositif is at play. New procedural forms of dialogue based steering and interaction between the client/case worker and employee/employer have been introduced. New types of interaction such as supervision and coaching, for instance, may be perceived as epochal answers to the new form of subjectivation and new conditions for steering; i.e. supervision and coaching are techniques expressing the new dispositif.

If it is correct that there is a new dispositif at play, and if it furthermore is correct that the core of this dispositif is self-creation and self-expression, the toolbox of the “administrator” is reduced to suggestions, not as the only legal tool, but as the only acceptable one, as juridical and normative dictates are regarded as a professional defeat. Rather, the dialogue is a self-technological arena where the following questions may be defined and answered: What is work, what is the ambition, what is development, what is responsibility and ascribed to whom etc. etc.? Obviously we are not saying that classification and signification is totally volatile, *aux contraire*, they will have a tendency towards stability anchored in local circulars and practices. The point is, however, that these locale practices challenges a core feature of the IAP interview. Local practices are a source of misadaptations to be handled whenever dialogical procedures are employed, be it during actual negotiations or on an institutional level.

Another challenge to the IAP is the asymmetrical character of the dialogue. Asymmetry, however, can't be avoided, since it operates on the level of the self-technological dispositif. On one side an “administrator” who continually is forced to co-reflect the possible strategic gab between the other's presentation of self and actual prospects. On the other side an agent who is obliged to be aware of the distance between genuine wishes and the actual context of negotiation. The result is a fragile balance between the “administrator” and client/employee challenging the IAP *as a dialogue*. An increasing amount of reflexive literature on coaching, supervision and protreptic is trying to circumvent such challenges technically or normatively (e.g. Kirkeby et al 2008).

The solution is not the introduction of arbitrary external criteria of success. This would undermine the dialogue itself, as the array of acceptable outcomes has in principle exploded for the self-creator. Objective success criteria are thus blurred, if the singularity of the IPA is accepted. Success criteria very much depend on the out-come of the dialogue, i.e. success criteria have become negotiable. Not only is a rich variety of possible outcomes socially acceptable to day (as the perpetually ascending career is no longer the absolutely dominant social measure), but also the function of the dialogue itself has turned opaque. The conversation might function as a tool for strategic management, but it might also function as an end in itself, where the presentation of the self is the peak of social participation, a moment of absolute intensity and presence: to participate in the creation of the IPA-society.

From a sociological perspective, one of the consequences of this development is that the collective becomes vulnerable. The vulnerability of the collective owes to a dialectical process in which the IAP, HRM and the new subjectivity form – and are themselves formed – by the

individualization processes in post-industrial (HRM/IAP) society. The growing tendency to individualize through reflexive, self-promoted processes in the form of microscopic spaces for negotiation renders it increasingly difficult to collectivize language and meaning. All statements become polysemic in the sense that their semantic possibilities are not fixed through a general institutionalization. Instead, they become fixed in the actual process in which the contract is drafted, step by step.

Simultaneously inclusion and exclusion also change character. Exclusion and marginalization no longer necessarily follow well-known systemic lines (e.g. one's position in the education system, profession, time working, age and gender). Inclusion and exclusion are instead linked together with isolated interactions and actions and to visions about the future and the willingness to accept risk (e.g. how you choose to use the education system). Consequently, exclusion and marginalization become collectively invisible. Exclusion, marginalization, and social problems are regarded as a function of individual choices and/or planning errors. But such planning errors are not necessarily inevitable, as the unemployed constantly receive new opportunities to present themselves in the social; i.e. individual planning anew in the next IAP interview.

It is this very feature of the new sociality which increases the capacity of society to absorb exclusion while maintaining integration (Luhmann, 1997; Born and Jensen, 2002). Furthermore, this practice is the core in the new dispositif. It operates exclusively on the level of local and temporary processes, where it functions within a framework of risks and possibilities. The exclusion is a latent threat which conceals itself in the spaces between processes and plans.

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<sup>1</sup> Employee development assessments have been introduced in all large companies and almost all public institutions in Denmark. See Holt Larsen et al. (1989) for a description of the language used in these assessments and their purpose. For a Foucauldian critique, see Townley (1999).