

# Redefining the Bureaucratic Encounter Between Service Providers and Service Users: Evidence from the Norwegian HUSK Projects

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## ABSTRACT

The HUSK projects, involving collaboration between service users, providers, educators, and researchers, coincided with the reorganization of national government services (NAV). The NAV reorganization brought together employment services, social insurance, and municipal social service benefits, and called for a service model where users would be empowered to influence the provision of services. In this analysis of the HUSK cases the authors focus on the relationship between the service user and the service provider, identifying themes in two broad domains: concepts of the individual that included the service user and the service provider and concepts of the relationship that included power, role, activity, interaction, and communication. Within each theme, the analysis highlights the transition from a traditional or historical state to a new or desired state and draws upon some of the classic literature that frames the encounters between service users and providers.

**KEYWORDS:** Service user, street-level bureaucrat, bureaucratic encounter, dialogue

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Given the unique dimensions of the Nordic welfare state and the HUSK projects designed to improve public social services in Norway, it is important to frame an analysis of the HUSK case studies within the context of social policy. As noted elsewhere in this volume, the local HUSK projects were based on the collaboration between service users,

providers, educators, and researchers that also coincided with the major reorganization of national government services (NAV). The NAV reorganization brought together employment services, social insurance, and municipal social service benefits for the purpose of making welfare services more efficient. The NAV reform was intended to address poverty and social exclusion by providing work incentives to help with the transition from benefits to gainful employment. Work-oriented services were required to be based on a comprehensive assessment of service user experiences and expertise as well as active service user involvement in activities that maximized choice and individual initiative.

This form of Norwegian “welfare reform” also called for a service model where each user or user group needed to be, to a greater degree, empowered to influence the provision of services by inserting their experiences and needs into service delivery decision making (Kildal & Nilssen, 2011). This transition from passive receipt of monetary assistance to active engagement in employment services raised questions about the difference between user participation and user involvement. User participation often focuses on policy development related to a social contract that includes specifying user rights and entitlements as well as duties and responsibilities. User involvement, on the other hand, often refers to policy implementation that features the availability of integrated, geographically accessible services. As Julkunen and Heikkila (2007) note, the processes of user involvement can be viewed as part of a continuum “from weaker to stronger or from more passive forms towards more active forms of involvement” (p. 89). The strongest or most

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active stage of the process features users as service definers/managers of their own programs, the next stage involves user influence (independent and competent to assess service quality), followed by user involvement (contributing to changes in service delivery), and finally user participation (advisers and informants, often related to the development and/or evaluation of public policy).

The empowerment of service users relies heavily on the normative foundations of the Nordic welfare state. As Kildal and Kuhnle (2005) note, the normative foundation in Norway includes a commitment in legislation to broad and universal protection and centralized administration using a complex set of regulations (sometimes leading to long delays in processing claims and negative stereotyping of people who are dependent). They identify the three essential features of the welfare state as: (a) a comprehensive social policy, (b) institutionalized social entitlements as social rights, and (c) social legislation in support of universal welfare for all citizens. They also identify the elements of universal welfare in Norway as including the following:

- Community-building and social inclusion (“pension as people’s insurance,” p. 21)
- Protection against social risks leading to social rights and prevention (“we are all in the same boat,” p. 22)
- Support for human dignity to counter social exclusion—removing the humiliating loss of social status and self-respect (“no longer the worthy or unworthy poor as a public burden,” p. 23)
- Economic and bureaucratic efficiencies (“no more selectivity or discrimination based on moral or economic grounds,” p. 24)

The historical origins of universal welfare in Norway can be traced to the role of citizens directing their welfare demands toward government, the emergence of egalitarian social structures rooted in preindustrial peasant society, the cultural homogeneity of the society (ethnic, religious, and linguistic), and the extra-ordinary crisis of World War II that brought political opponents together to form a “broader common values platform” (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005, p. 20).

In this analysis the authors focus on issues in the relationship between the service user and the service provider reflected in the HUSK cases. As highlighted in *Figure 1*, the cases can be categorized in terms of dialogical processes, social work education, and service innovation. In the next section, a brief review of classic works that examines the service user–service provider relationship identifies central dilemmas and dynamics in the encounters between users and providers. The cross-case analysis that follows

**FIGURE 1**  
**Selected HUSK Cases**

### **Dialogue**

#### *Individual Perspectives*

1. Traces of User Participation: User Perspectives on Conversations between Social workers and Users (HUSK Agder)
2. A Researcher’s Experience with Service User Involvement: A self-reflective essay of participating in a Course for Changing Attitude

#### *Group Perspectives*

1. Dialogue Seminars in Baerum (HUSK Oslo Region)
2. The Evolution of the HUSK Dialogue Group (HUSK Mid-Norway)

### **Social Work Education**

1. The University Clinic in Social Work in the NAV Sagene District Office (HUSK Oslo Region)
2. User Involvement in Social Work Education (HUSK Agder)

### **Service Innovation**

#### *Service Users*

1. Courses for Changing Attitudes (HUSK Oslo Region)
2. Users Experiences with the Social Services (HUSK Stavanger Region)
3. The Meeting Place (HUSK Stavanger Region)

#### *Service Providers*

1. Professional Text: Documenting Professional Work (HUSK Mid-Norway)
2. The Conceptual Project (HUSK Agder)

represents a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that is informed, but not limited, by this literature. In the concluding section, we reflect on questions and lessons emerging from the HUSK cases.

## **Literature Review**

Much attention has been given in the social work literature to the relationship between service users and service providers in the context of public social services. This selective review focuses first on the provider experience articulated by Lipsky (1980; 2010) in his street-level bureaucrat (SLB) framework. It then turns to the analyses of service user experiences outlined by Hasenfeld and others (Hasenfeld, 1985; Hasenfeld, Rafferty, & Zald, 1987; Hasenfeld & Steinmetz, 1981). Last, counterbalancing these largely critical views of the relationship, more optimistic perspectives offered by

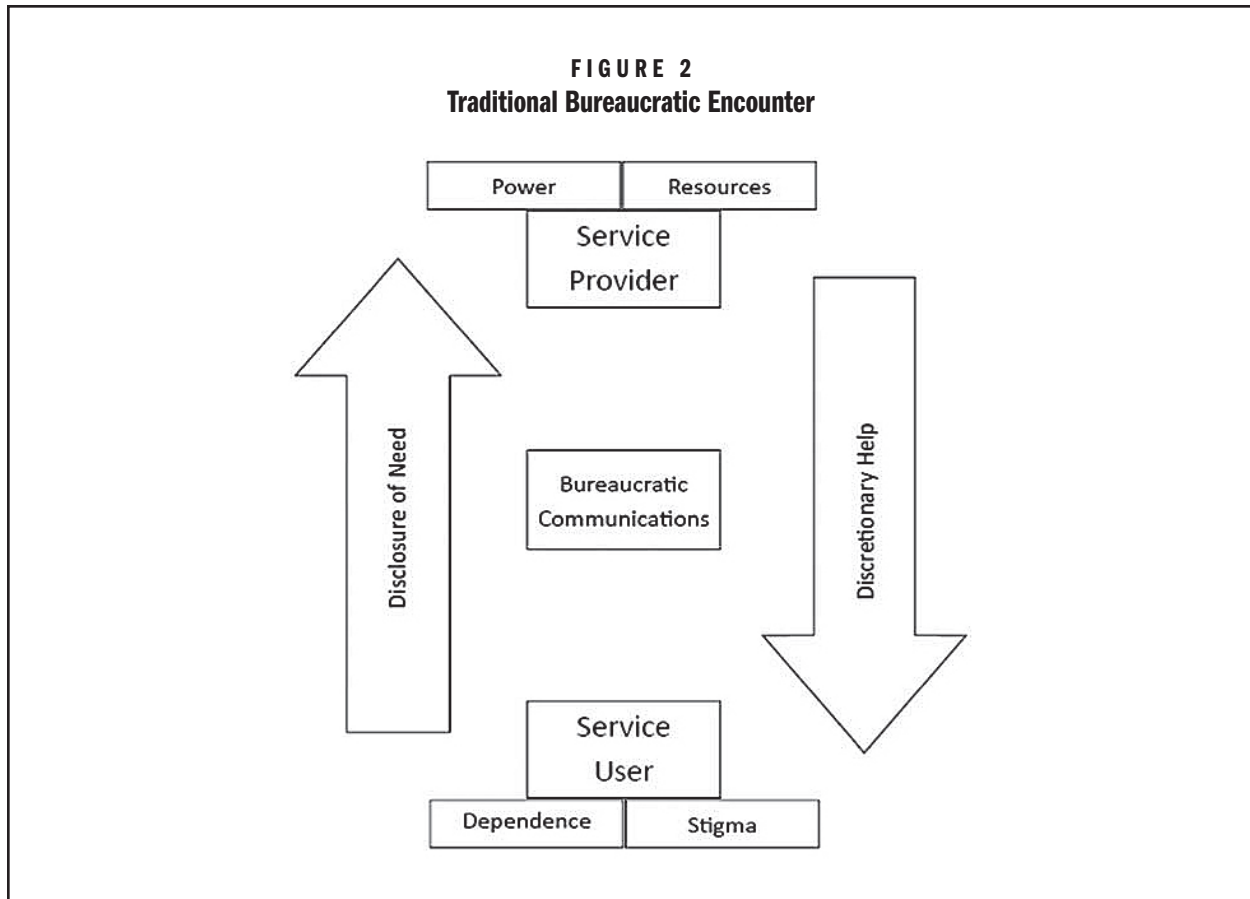
Goodsell (1981), Hupe and Hill (2007), Lefton (1970), and Seikkula, Arnkil, and Ericksson (2003) are highlighted.

The pioneering research of Lipsky (1980, 2010) sought to identify the discretionary components of the work of service providers whom he called SLBs. As Lipsky (2010) notes, when exploring different concepts of work, service provider discretion is needed given the complexity of service needs and the sensitivity required to address them. Lipsky (1980) articulated a framework in which the conditions of the street-level bureaucracy shape the exercise of discretion by the SLB. The conditions impacting the use of discretion include uncertain policies and goals, inadequate resources, and the need to exercise human judgment in order to carry out the SLB role. In response to these conditions, SLBs develop work routines and beliefs about the client that allow them to manage work responsibilities; however, while these routines and simplifications assist them in managing complexity, they are frequently subject to bias and the objectification of the service user (Lipsky, 2010). Beliefs about the client include views about the role of the clients in assuming responsibility for their troubles and about their capacity to exercise choice or judgment about their own lives. There is an ongoing tension between the bureaucratic model of detachment and resource limitations and the human relations model of recognizing the humanity in each person and being equipped to respond to specific needs (Lipsky, 2010). Commenting in an updated edition, Lipsky (2010) notes the importance of strategies for increasing client power “for their potential contribution to changing street-level relationships” (p. 193), including demystifying bureaucratic policies and practices, instituting practices to strengthen accountability to clients, and developing mechanisms allowing client participation in agency governance.

While service providers represent the welfare state in their role as SLBs, service users assume the role of applicant while engaging in a wide range of bureaucratic encounters. Hasenfeld (1985) defines bureaucratic encounters as including the following elements: (a) a form of exchange relationships involving the transfer of resources between clients and service bureaucracies, (b) the client obtaining services at minimal personal cost, (c) the organization obtaining resources needed to operate and minimize costs, (d) the power-dependence relationship between clients and SLBs determining the outcome, (e) client dependency proportional to the client’s needing services (the poorer the client, the greater the impact of the SLB), and (f) bureaucracies dependent upon the client for achieving their mission.

In an effort to focus on the power dependency associated with the bureaucratic encounter in public assistance organizations, Hasenfeld and colleagues (1987) focused on such organizational factors as the client’s limited awareness of service availability and eligibility criteria, administrative controls reflecting service scarcity, low levels of professionalization despite high levels of discretion, and the existence of stigmatizing norms and perceived unfair policies and procedures. They found that service users experience bureaucratic encounters with a sense of powerlessness, low expectations for satisfaction, and low rates of utilization due to reluctance to exercise their rights based on the stigmatizing aspect of disclosing private problems to public officials and experiencing the bureaucratic encounters as demeaning. In particular, they noted that “the bureaucratic encounter is both an information exchange and a negotiation of a conflict management process through which the applicant’s normative framework and expectations are brought in line with the organization’s” (p. 402). In essence, they observed that “welfare state bureaucracies use their power advantage (over the applicant) to structure the bureaucratic encounter in a manner that buttresses their political economies” (p. 405).

Hasenfeld and Steinmetz (1981) found that client-official encounters are shaped by the forces inside and outside the organization that result in a set of tactics used in the bureaucratic encounter by both parties. The tactics used by service users include: (a) sustaining persistence in the face of discouraging obstacles, (b) exercising persuasion regarding need and service eligibility, (c) managing appearances in order to “pass” as higher social status (dress, appearance), (d) gaining familiarity with bureaucratic procedures and language, (e) using threats, and (f) participating in collective organizing (client advocacy groups). In contrast, the tactics used by service providers when dealing with service users include: (a) ignoring the impact of waiting time, (b) using discouraging or abusive language, (c) controlling communications (completing questions on intake form), (d) selectively disseminating information (limited transparency of policies and procedures), (e) labeling or defining client identities for the purpose of organizational processing, and (f) engaging in incomplete or insufficient communications due to differences in culture and/or class. Lefton (1970) provides an alternative to the primarily negative depictions offered by Lipsky, Hasenfeld, and others. Using the concepts of laterality (client’s biographical space) and longitudinality (time dimension of service), Lefton (1970) notes that client-serving organizations are as influenced by the behaviors of clients



as they are by the behaviors of staff members and other stakeholders. In defining a high degree of organizational responsiveness to client needs, Lefton (1970) developed the concept of “plus laterality” in which “a client-serving organization takes the ‘whole’ person into account in its efforts to effect given social, psychological or physical change” (p. 19). Based on the view of organizations as social psychological systems of interacting parts (e.g., service users and providers), he viewed “plus laterality” as a way to democratize bureaucracies.

Similar to Lefton, Goodsell (1981) found in his research on service providers and users in a public assistance organization a form of bureaucratic encounter that he called “positive discrimination.” Goodsell (1981) defines positive discrimination as “the granting of personal favors in the form of extra-attentive behaviors to individual clients (not categories of them) who are for some reason personally appealing (worthy)” (p. 771). This form of bureaucratic encounter involves a more open manner in the face-to-face client encounter where interest is shown in the ongoing events in the life of a client (e.g., health, children, etc.) as well as sharing limited aspects of the worker’s life (children,

etc.) as a form of power-sharing and humanizing dialogue. The benefits of “positive discrimination” include increased service user comfort based on receiving extra attention, temporary service provider relief from exhausting routines and enhanced self-image as a valued professional helper, and an increased sense of job satisfaction experienced by service providers based on the exercise of personal power and empowerment achieved by resisting bureaucratic constraints.

Citing Lipsky (1980) and Hasenfeld and Steinmetz (1981), Hupe and Hill (2007) acknowledge the traditionally asymmetrical relationship between the service provider and the service user resulting from the non-voluntary status of service users and the service provider’s discretion over resources. They offer a typology of accountability regimes in which the public administrative type is characterized by conformity to standard operating procedures and rule-bound relationships between users and providers. In contrast, they propose a model of participatory accountability involving “shared goal and standard setting” between SLBs and service users (Hupe & Hill, 2007, p. 294). In this model, accountability occurs within a relationship of trust

**FIGURE 3**  
**Themes Emerging from Cross-Case Analysis**

**Concept of Individuals:**

**Toward Partnership and Shared Expertise**

Service Provider:

Expert Helper —————> Participant/Partner

Service User:

Passive Recipient —————> Expertise and Worthiness

**Concept of Relationship:**

**Toward Equality and Authenticity**

Power

Asymmetry —————> Voice/Rights

Role:

Helper and Helped —————> Reciprocal Disclosure

Activity:

Bureaucratic Encounter —————> Shared Dialogue Activity

Interaction:

One on One —————> Group

Place:

Office —————> Shared/Safe Space

Communication:

Formal —————> Informal

Problems —————> Worries

that emphasizes service user voice and is focused on whether shared outcomes have been achieved.

Recent efforts to understand the bureaucratic encounter can also be seen in the work of Seikkula and colleagues (2003) who conceptualize “zones of subjective worry” (small worries, growing worries, and great worries). The zones can be captured on a continuum from no worries (1) to *slight worries* (2) to *repeated thoughts of worry* (3) to *growing worry that diminishes confidence* (4) to *marked worry resulting in reduced resources* (5) to *strong and constant worry that reduce energy and resources* (6), and finally to *very deep and strong worry that exhausts capacities and leads to danger or harm*. Since worries are shared by all humans, Seikkula and colleagues contend that the concept of “zones of subjective worry” provides for a more equal “playing field” for building and maintaining the service user–provider relationship. Exploring “zones of subjective worry” involves: (a) separating “talking” from “listening” in order to make room for inner dialogues, (b) finding a safe place to address

unexpected questions that provide opportunities to think aloud and engage in thought experiments, and (c) approaching the present situation by focusing on the future where many worries reside (Seikkula et al., 2003).

This brief review of the literature provides multiple perspectives to inform analysis of the HUSK cases. *Figure 2* summarizes the key concepts that characterize the traditional bureaucratic encounter as described by Lipsky, Hasenfeld, and others, including power dependence, stigma, and unilateral disclosure on the part of the service user, contrasted with power, resources, and discretionary assistance on the part of the service provider, with communication constrained by bureaucratic requirements.

## Methods

Following close reading and discussion of the HUSK cases, the authors developed an initial analysis with reference to Lipsky’s (1980, 2010) SLB framework, drawing additionally upon Hupe and Hill’s (2007) related work defining participatory accountability. In this analysis, a set of preliminary codes were created and used by the authors and a research assistant to code the set of cases using the comment function in Microsoft Word to perform coding. The codes developed for this first stage of the analysis included participatory accountability, power sharing, coproduction of services, reciprocity, choice, asymmetrical relationships, objectification of service user and provider, role of place, conceptions of work, and goals.

After reviewing the first draft of the cross-case analysis, a decision was made to broaden the analytical approach in order to integrate an inductive coding strategy using a line-by-line emergent coding process. This process generated a set of codes that retained revised versions of some of the original SLB concepts, added new codes, and restructured the relationship between codes. A list of code frequencies was generated in order to identify high frequency codes both within and across cases. At the same time, the authors engaged in additional reading in the literature on bureaucrat encounters in the social services. Drawing upon this literature and with reference to the code frequency analysis, the codes and related excerpts were reviewed by the authors, and an expanded thematic framework was developed as summarized in *Figure 3*. Each concept was represented in multiple cases ranging from three (e.g., Activity) to nine (e.g., Service User Conceptualization). In the cross-case summary that follows, a purposive selection of examples from the cases is used to illustrate the themes.

## Summary of the Cross-Case Analysis

As summarized in *Figure 3*, the cross-case analysis identified themes in two broad domains: concepts of the individual that included the service user and the service provider and concepts of the relationship that included power, role, activity, interaction, and communication. Within each theme, the analysis focused on the transition from a traditional or historical state to a new or desired state. The following discussion briefly describes and illustrates each theme.

### CONCEPTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL: TOWARD PARTNERSHIP AND SHARED EXPERTISE

Participants spoke of the traditional conceptualization and roles of the service provider and service user in the Norwegian welfare state and described ways in which these were changed within some of the HUSK initiatives. As one participant in the Users Experiences with Social Services case noted, both *providers and users approach the relationship with biased views* about their counterpart:

I learned that both the social worker and the user enter the service relationship with their own prejudices; namely, my views as a social worker of service users, and the users views of both social workers and the system they represent. (p. 41)

In the case on Courses of Changing Attitudes, participants noted the importance of reducing biased views by developing understanding between providers and users with regard to the “skills, personal qualities, and personal experiences of the other” (p. 11).

### CONCEPT OF WELFARE STATE BUREAUCRAT: TOWARD PARTNERSHIP

Comments by participants in some HUSK cases reflect the concepts of the traditional and transformed service provider. For example, a social worker involved in the HUSK Mid-Norway Dialog Group described her previous work experiences in the 1990s, highlighting the effect of high case loads and absence of oversight that contributed to the traditional conceptualization of service provider as “helper” and service user as “passive recipient.” She explains:

Under such conditions I struggled to get good conversations and build relationships, where I could become familiar with the particular man or women in front of me. This created frustration in my daily work. . . . I was the good helper who knew best, while the client was and would still be the passive recipient. (p. 29)

As the concept and role of the service provider changed in profound ways in the HUSK Dialog Group, some staff welcomed the transition, while others resisted, stating:

Not all staff members were comfortable with working side-by-side with service users, especially left (sic) alone to share a meeting room with them. It was strange to go from conversations at the office behind a closed door to casual and informal conversations with ordinary people. Many staff members noted that they got energy and strength when they worked closely with people who often felt powerless. (p. 30)

The Meeting Place case captures the difficulties and benefits associated with a changed concept of the service provider and service user. In this case, the provider’s expert knowledge is challenged by the user’s knowledge derived from experience as follows:

Practitioner’s expert knowledge as the norm is being challenged with the meeting with users. The knowledge is based on the users’ own experiences and how they feel about being dependent on the system. When the practitioners are present within a users’ area of comfort, they can help to break down the boundaries that are there. (p. 34)

A social worker involved in the Users Experiences with Social Services case spoke to the reframing of provider expertise and its relationship to power asymmetry in the relationship:

Those of us who worked in the HUSK projects were probably more open than was usual in the social services. Social workers are used to being the experts and being in control so when the user is in need of help, we are the helpers. An equal partnership clearly challenged this view. The staff found it strange that they should deal with people whom they suspected would be very critical of the social services department. (p. 41)

### CONCEPT OF SERVICE USER: TOWARD WORTHINESS AND EXPERTISE

To an even greater extent, the HUSK cases reflect changes in the conceptualization of service users. The following five interrelated concepts emerge across the cases: recognition, worthiness, expertise, individuality, and responsibility.

**Recognition.** In many of the cases, recognition (i.e., hearing and seeing the service user as a human being) was an important aspect of the experiences reported by participants. Without this basic experience of recognition by the service provider, a service user in the Users Experience case described the following loss of sense of self:

They do not think about the person. You mean nothing, and I was very preoccupied about it; don't they see me? Is it really true that I almost do not exist? I then feel that they do not care, I do not mean anything. I feel like I literally slip away.  
(p. 38)

In the Traces case, the experience of being recognized and taken seriously is captured in the following:

The youth explains that user participation is about taking people seriously, and not avoiding their issues. . . . The youths say that social workers must take them and what they say seriously if participation is to take place. They say the social workers, as professionals, must be able to understand them, especially beyond what is explicitly expressed.  
(p. 58)

For service users to be heard, service providers needed to listen beyond the spoken words in order to interpret what is known about the individual user.

**Worthiness.** Many of the HUSK initiatives reflect a central concern with transforming the view of the service user from unworthy to worthy. Participants in the Dialog Group initiative described the following sustained shift in the perceived status of service users:

We all had the same social status, everyone were [sic ] equal. The group developed a feeling of togetherness, where you could be yourself without fear of being looked down upon. You did not need to feel ashamed. It made it easier to try new things and face new challenges that might not have been considered in the past. (p. 31)

These participants reported a related shift in the relationship between service user and service provider when “the user is no longer in the role of seeking help, but is a person with resources” (p. 29). In the Traces case, youth participants noted the connection between self-worth and individual change, as one described how her social worker challenged her to do new things: “I am very much a person who believes

she can't do anything. It has been important to show what I can do. I can't do that. Or . . . I have to be pushed to do it.”

**User expertise.** The changes in perceptions of service user worthiness were related to increased recognition of user expertise in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services and the education and training of new social workers. For example, in the Meeting Place case, it was noted that the emphasis on service user expertise challenged the traditional model of “practitioner's expert knowledge” by focusing on “the users' own experiences and how they feel to be dependent on the system” (p. 34). The Dialog Group case described challenges in helping service providers and users understand that user participation:

. . . was important because their knowledge and experience was needed to develop the new space. We needed to develop a culture where everyone felt comfortable to participate and where the experiences of everyone were equally important, regardless of background and education (p. 30).

The experiences of service users contributed to the education of nonuser members:

All members of the Dialog Group had their experiences which they brought with them. While no one in the group had a social work degree, everyone had many years of experience with the ‘system.’ You could say that everyone in the group acquired an informal education about the experiences of service users. (p. 32)

**Individuality.** Perhaps implicit in the theme of recognition is the focus on individuality that appeared in some of the cases. For example, in the Dialog Seminars, a proposal that emerged in the third seminar related to the design of individualized measures for assessing user progress: “Measures must be tailored to the users so that they fit the user—and not vice versa. We need to find non-traditional solutions that suit the user” (p. 24). Similarly, the aim in the Professional Text case was to provide a guide for documentation that would help the provider “become familiar with the client's situation, needs, resources, and perspective” (p. 63).

In contrast, a social worker participant in the Dialog Group described her struggles in traditional social work settings to “become familiar with the particular man or woman in front of [her]” (p. 29). Similarly, in the Conceptual Project, participants were “concerned about how

categorization of users could represent an obstacle to capturing the uniqueness of each individual situation” (p. 68):

In NAV labor (employment services), the users were considered as ordinary job seekers but in NAV social insurance (services) the users were considered as disabled and needed follow-up. I think we’ve had very different views of exactly the same users, due to the type of (service or) benefit they received” (p. 68). With respect to the reforms, one provider noted the need to be more concerned about how we treat each other and said: “We must not treat everyone in the same way: If you are not like this or like that, then you are not interested in getting a job. It’s not like this. (p. 69)

**Responsibility.** The recognition of the worthiness, expertise, and individuality of the service users was accompanied, in some cases, by changes in how user responsibility is viewed and exercised. For example, service users in the Meeting Place case assumed considerable responsibility when they were:

. . . hired to do a job; they are responsible for when the house is open, for purchasing and serving, cleaning and practical tasks, such as maintenance . . . . It is the host’s responsibility to organize the day, determine what is to be served and how long and how often the facility should be open. (p. 33)

In the Traces of User Participation case, youth participants noted the value of their own initiative and action. For example, one participant “emphasized that it was his own efforts that gave him the job” (p. 57). As the author explains:

The youth’s reflections show that they see user participation as part of being active in promoting the changes that have taken place. This activity goes beyond their interaction with their social worker, and relates to more options than those the social worker can offer. They present themselves as proactive individuals who do not settle for suggestions or activities that they are dissatisfied with. They appear as autonomous individuals who take control and do not want their days filled—at least not for the long run—with what other people fill them with. (p. 57)

However, the author goes on to point out that while the youth view themselves as acting autonomously, the youth’s

goal of being engaged in activities is consistent with the overall goals of the program.

### CONCEPT OF RELATIONSHIP: TOWARD EQUALITY AND AUTHENTICITY

#### *Power: Toward Voice and Rights*

A number of the HUSK cases involved efforts to make the transition from power asymmetry to less asymmetry and more equality between service users and providers. The leaders of the Dialog Seminars who were service users envisioned a project in which they would “work equally with practitioners towards common goals” (p. 19) and led a change process that they referred to as the “coup” (p. 20). After demanding equal user control of meetings (including the agenda and minutes), they reported that “[w]e felt we had accomplished something, a balance of power was created” (p. 20). However, these efforts faced considerable resistance from service providers, who explained:

The user representatives realized their desires, but not without resistance and after several rounds of negotiations. Such a process is in line with the essence of empowerment where you have to expect resistance when it comes to the redistribution of power. (p. 22)

The user-led group went on to establish a series of Dialog Seminars that “made it possible to achieve a redistribution of power in the way that user representatives gradually took more responsibility . . . [giving] them the opportunity to meet the staff in a more equal position, where they in partnership can collaborate to improve the services” (p. 25). However, subsequent experiences of user participants with respect to power symmetry were very different. Two who went on to work as employees of KREM reported: “As project managers with user experiences, we experienced powerlessness, rather than the power and influence (we developed) in the work at HUSK Baerum” (p. 27).

The Dialog Group also sought to empower service users. Reflecting on the power relations when she worked in a traditional social service office in the 1990s, one of the social workers noted:

When I decided to study to be a social worker, I had a hope to enter into a partnership with human beings on an equal arena. I wanted to engage in joint efforts that could lay the foundation for change and a better life for the clients, however, conversations with clients were either in the reception or in the office behind closed doors. No one



could monitor what we said, (how we) behaved, or how we exercised our power. . . . The power structure was evident, and those clients who needed our help were completely at the mercy of our reviews. (p. 29)

In contrast to this earlier experience, the Dialog Group was “user-driven” and designed to allow service users to express their opinions on services where “we all had the same social status, everyone was equal” (p. 31).

### *Role: Toward Reciprocal Contributions*

Accompanying efforts to balance power in the service user–service provider relationship were changes in the roles played by these individuals in service delivery and decision making. For example, the Dialog Group emphasized a shift in role for service users, from help-seeker to active resource contributor. In the case on Changing Attitudes, service users were trained as coaches for other participants and acted as role models for current service users. In the Dialog Seminars, user representatives served as process advisors, led the seminars, and engaged in data collection. The case author concludes that “The users are a resource and should contribute, and the (official) ‘helpers’ should not help, but collaborate.” The author goes on to highlight individual challenges in assuming new roles, often relying on personal characteristics as well as past practices and experiences that call for reflecting on these roles to plan further work and how the tasks should be allocated.

In the Meeting Place case, users were hired as hosts and performed tasks that included “purchasing and serving, cleaning, and practical tasks, such as maintenance” (p. 33), as well as deciding “how they will organize the day, what to serve and how long, and how often they should be open” (p. 33). As in the Dialogue Seminar case, this role transformation presented challenges for service users and service providers, as it required “new ways of understanding equal collaboration” (p. 34).

### *Activity: From Bureaucratic Encounter to Shared Dialogue Activity*

Several of the HUSK projects featured new types of shared activities that differed from the typical bureaucratic encounter that focuses on eligibility determination, needs assessment, or service referrals. In the Changing Attitudes case, the participants hiked, climbed, and explored the local town in Turkey where the course was held. They used these outings as an opportunity to share issues and get to know each other. As the participating researcher noted, it was essential that all participated equally in the storytelling and

other activities, so that all could feel confident sharing. The participant researcher explained:

I shared many things about myself in the group that I would not tell to (almost) anyone because I developed a sense of full confidence in the group. The confidence was there *because everyone did the same sharing*—it was not only one party that would “confess” to another where the other is [a] professional worker. I gained such a strong feeling when I could see/hear that others understood what I was saying and what I was feeling. (p. 16)

In the Dialog Group case, service users and providers shared meals together in a common meeting space that provided an opportunity for informal dialog and cooperation, representing a substantial change from common practices. The change was described as “. . . quite a contrast from communicating in a public office, and this new idea met with considerable resistance. Not all staff members were comfortable with working side-by-side with service users, let alone sharing a meeting room with them” (p. 32).

Some service users also struggled with feeling comfortable in this new shared activity: “Some (service users) sat with their bowl of food in a corner or in another room until it became comfortable to join the rest of the group at the table” (p. 32).

One of the initial events in the Meeting Place case involved service users and managers traveling together to Copenhagen to visit a similar project. The trip enabled them to walk and talk together so that they “got to know each other as persons,” contributing substantially to the level of respect, cooperation, and trust among participants (p. 33). The development of the Meeting Place itself provided further opportunities for shared activities, “both practical and organizational” (p. 33). Participants noted that shared activity led to a sense of shared ownership: “the facility renovation was an important part of the partnership, and was performed by the participants in the project . . . (where) the practical work and effort from all parties gave everyone a sense of ownership of the house” (pp. 33–34).

### *Interaction: Toward Group Processes*

Group processes were a common feature of the HUSK cases that provided a number of benefits. For example, in the case on Changing Attitudes, the group provided emotional support and an experience of equality for participants. “When the participants were asked to read their stories to the group (only as a voluntary act), the fairy tales elicited emotional responses in an environment where the service

users, researchers, educators, students and practitioners were all equal” (p. 10). The group process also contributed to the development of a shared understanding between service users, practitioners, students, educators, and researchers and provided a venue to identify changes at the level of individual and system relationships.

In order to design the User Involvement Project, a group process was developed to involve service users, a student, representatives of service user organizations, and an educator. After regular meetings and discussions of user involvement and user expertise, a decision was made to employ service users as mentors to students, with the mentoring itself to be provided in a group format. While the user representatives felt the need to acquire specific training in group methods, the educator sought to reassure the service users that they were fully equipped to engage in dialogue that emphasized “reflection as the basis for learning” (p. 50). Group membership was an important factor, such that the planning group decided to exclude teachers and supervisors in order “to give students a space where they would not be evaluated (when it came to sharing) their own practical experiences” (p. 52).

### *Place: Office to Shared/Safe Space*

The multiple HUSK projects highlighted the importance of place, particularly settings outside of the social service offices. These alternative service locations were seen as contributing to shared understandings, authentic relationship building, and the empowerment of service users. For example, the Changing Attitudes case took place in a small rural town in Turkey where the foreign location amplified “the impact of the experience of service users, service practitioners, students, and academics working together to develop a common understanding of what is needed to achieve a better relationship and cooperation, both at the individual and on the system level” (p. 11). The participating researcher highlighted multiple benefits, stating:

It was clear that the venue made a difference in terms of its remoteness, privacy, intimacy, and feeling of being in another world. The climate of Turkey made it possible to be outside for large parts of the day, both on adventure tours of nature and the sea as well as for small group meetings. (The process of) being so close to nature gave me new energy and many others expressed the same reaction. (p. 14)

However, some raised the question of whether changes achieved in a new and distant location could be sustained

upon return to a familiar environment to work with a social worker who had not participated in the course (p. 16).

With respect to the impact of place, the Dialog Seminars represented contrasting experiences. The seminars identified a desire on the part of users and staff for “a meeting place outside the office, where they can share experiences and information, and how they can work together more informally” (p. 25). In a contrasting reference to place, two service users hired as project managers experienced striking exclusion from the NAV/social service offices, explaining:

After a while we got an office with a good size for the two of us, where we could work and have meetings. The office was not part of the NAV or social services, but physically nearby, just across the hallway. The office had no access to toilets, water or canteen. . . . When we finally got the key to the social services office, it felt like we did not belong there, that we had snuck in and we were followed, and sometimes even stopped by the employees. (p. 26)

In the Meeting Place case, communal meeting spaces were created where service users and providers could engage in very different kinds of interactions and conversations. The Meeting Place was designed as a “big room in the middle of the house owned by the municipality and used by various nonprofit organizations” (that provided) a place to meet for informal discussions over a cup of coffee where facilities were shared. The rooms were used equally by participants and staff. We got feedback that it was nice to gather there and one participant noted, “Here, I know that they are happy together. There are no conflicts hanging on the walls. Here you can talk together like normal people” (p. 30). By moving the interactions out of the social services agency and into the community, the Meeting Place provided a different physical context for interaction that helped to challenge the “actors’ perceptions and stereotypes of each other” (p. 33). The conversations between users and providers were altered and became more “informal and not about results or writing minutes” (p. 34). Summarizing the lessons of the project, the author wrote that “it is important to have a venue to meet, not necessarily to come up with solutions or answer of questions, but to talk and find support in each other, and to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations” (p. 34).

In the University Clinic case, social work education experiences were moved out of the university and into the agency in order to facilitate collaboration with practitioners

and service users. This experience helped to challenge student stereotypes about the agency:

For many students, it is their first experience in a NAV office, while others have experience as former NAV service users. The students really appreciated this orientation to practice as it made a positive impression on them, especially given the negative media coverage of the NAV reorganization reforms and scandal. (p. 45)

The NAV office became a classroom that reflected “situated learning” within a “community of practice” (p. 47). Similarly, the User Involvement case makes the point that student mentoring by service users is provided in the workplace, helping to further distinguish this experience from the university-based guidance they receive (p. 51).

### *Communication: Toward Authenticity*

Finally, the HUSK cases involve substantially different kinds of communication between service users and practitioners, based on dialogue involving storytelling, reciprocal disclosure, and informal conversations, with the potential to transform the relationship between individuals with different backgrounds and experiences. The Traces case focuses intensively on the individual communications between youth and social workers, highlighting the central role of dialogue in social service encounters. Communications between social workers and youth were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the participants, who were then interviewed about their perception of the conversation. The youth participants emphasized “the importance of talking together to clear things up. In conversations, they could exercise influence, and could be influenced” (p. 57).

In the case on Changing Attitudes, fictional storytelling using fantasy figures, metaphors, and symbols was used to help participants “create meaning in their lives through the stories they tell about themselves” (p. 10). Through this exercise, using a very different kind of language than the bureaucratic language of assessment or case planning, “service providers and users are given the opportunity to develop a common understanding of each other’s experiences and perspectives, meeting the person ‘behind the mask’ and exploring the process of redefining relationships in social service settings” (p. 11). The researcher who participated in the course explained that while social workers typically do not self-disclose in their professional interactions with service users, she viewed it as appropriate to “be more personal than is usual for a social worker or researcher” (p. 14), allowing participants to “connect with each other as

human beings and get to know each other as a humans” (p. 15), through a process “founded on reciprocity and trust” (p. 17).

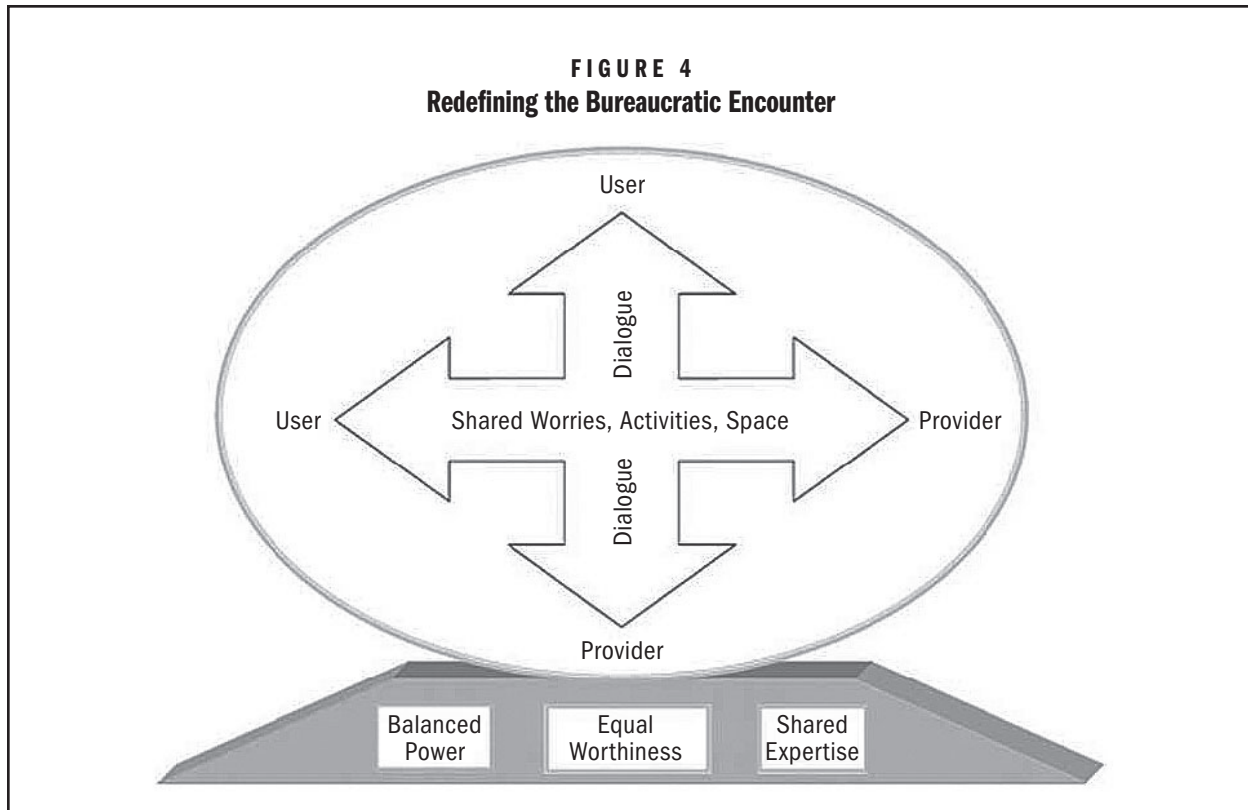
In the Dialog Group and Meeting Place cases, participants also highlighted the different kinds of communication in which they engaged, including informal discussions. A Meeting Place participant praised these informal encounters that allowed people to “talk together like normal people” (p. 30). While it felt strange for some to “go from conversations at the office behind a closed door to casual and informal conversations with ordinary people” (p. 30), the authors report that “social workers gained considerable experience by engaging in informal conversations with participants in this new space” (p. 30). This project further focused on communications by creating the Dialog Group to develop “an easier way for service users to present their views on things they found to be a problem as well as what seemed to be working well” (p. 31). The topics were selected by group members, based on their importance, often leading to “engaged and heated discussions” (p. 31). As one participant explained, the Dialog Group was a setting where authentic communication was made possible: “The Dialog Group was a place where you could drop the social mask that you normally use to hide the fact that you are a social services user. In the Dialogue Group, we all had the same social status, everyone was equal” (p. 31).

### **Discussion**

The HUSK projects reflect efforts to redefine the nature of practice within public assistance programs, with particular attention to transforming the relationship between service users and providers. *Figure 4* highlights key aspects of the redefined encounter between users and providers that emerged in the HUSK cases.

Central to the HUSK reforms was the recognition of the equal worth of service users that is in stark contrast to the traditional stigma described by Hasenfeld and colleagues (1987). The discretionary nature of the activities carried out by SLBs (Lipsky, 1980) made it possible to expand frontline practice to include increased power sharing within the bureaucratic encounter. In line with Lipsky’s later prescription for increased client power (Lipsky, 2010), multiple approaches to power sharing provided both the service provider and user with an opportunity to reflect upon and share their own perspective as a way of making explicit their tacit knowledge. Power sharing served to humanize the discretionary power of the service provider and empower the service user, maximizing both experience and expertise

**FIGURE 4**  
**Redefining the Bureaucratic Encounter**



relevant to managing the bureaucratic encounter. This focus on service user expertise from experience provided a way to increase client resources, thereby, decreasing the dependency on the provider that Hasenfeld (1985) described. Rebalancing the power between service users and providers facilitated role transformations in which their contributions to the exchange relationship were more equal, though not identical.

As illustrated in the HUSK cases, shared activities provide a form of intervention when both service users and providers are engaged in meal preparation and meeting planning. While this form of activity may be common in residential human service organizations where both users and providers are in sustained contact with one another, it is less common in community-based services where various forms of individual bureaucratic encounters are the dominant activity. Shared service evaluation activities were also important, reflecting a more participatory accountability model as outlined by Hupe and Hill (2007). In addition to these shared activities, the location of service was also significant in a number of cases. Moving out of government offices to locales that foster communications proved to be another important finding from the HUSK cases. The shift in the communications environment from formality to informality increased the potential for power-sharing and

more open, candid relationships reflecting both “positive discrimination” as noted by Goodsell (1981) and “plus laterality” as noted by Lefton (1970).

Another example of power sharing can be found in the language used for discussion of services and goals between service users and providers. As service providers shift their focus from “helping to address service user problems” to joint engaging in an exploration of self, it becomes possible to amplify the volume and clarity of service user voices as well as rebalance the traditional hierarchical, power-dependent relationship between two human beings. As the content of communications between service users and providers shifted away from the information exchange related to user problems described by Hasenfeld and colleagues (1987) and toward authentic and reciprocal disclosure, the stigma associated with unilateral disclosure of personal problems to public officials was reduced and, in some cases, removed.

The emphasis in the HUSK cases on dialogical communications (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006) illustrates the importance of “removing masks” through dialogical meetings as a way to open up communications within unequal power relationships. Seikkula and colleagues (2003) point to the need in the service provider–user relationship to move from a predominant focus on objective facts (e.g., limited job skills, inadequate work histories, etc.) to subjective

worries in order to capture what service providers see subjectively and what service users experience subjectively. The focus in the HUSK cases on listening in order to fully recognize the uniqueness of human beings engaged in the service provider–service user relationship can be informed by the worry zone framework outlined by Seikkula and colleagues (2003), where listening and thinking out loud are critical aspects of communication.

The pioneering efforts of the HUSK projects raise many questions for future practice and research, and a few are noted below:

1. How can future social work practitioners learn the power-sharing skills associated with this form of redefined practice and use them effectively in bureaucratic settings?
2. Is there evidence that the use of these skills leads to improved outcomes for service users?
3. What are the implications of shifting the focus of dialogue between service providers and service users from “problem solving” within the context of the bureaucratic encounter to the articulation of “shared worries” within the framework of “zones of subjective worries?”
4. To what extent are the practice issues of shared activities, alternative meeting places, and authentic communications relevant to different fields of practice beyond public assistance services?
5. What types of organizational and managerial supports are needed in a wide variety of human service organizations to help staff engage in new forms of practice?
6. To what extent can government policy and funding support future innovations as illustrated in the HUSK projects?

In reflecting on the role of helping and helplessness, Gummer (1979) nearly 35 years ago commented on the structure of discretion in the American welfare system by noting:

that the social work profession, because of its history, assumes an orientation to its clients that flows from a conception of the client as intrinsically dependent and thus with limited abilities to participate in the process of service provision. Social workers must seriously reappraise their positions as more and more clients demand to be treated in ways that require severe limitations on the prerogatives traditionally claimed by professionals. The issue of professional and administrative discretion

gets to the heart of one of the most pressing of modern concerns; namely, the way in which people’s behavior should be regulated. (p. 225)

To what extent does this perception of dependent service users and dominant service provider continue to exist in today’s welfare systems? While some will argue that there has been little change, others will note that our colleagues in Norway and elsewhere in other welfare states are taking promising strides in the direction of transforming practice and redefining the bureaucratic encounter.

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