Studying policy realization as a Multi-Sited managerial practice

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Currently, digitization is seen as a means to increase efficiency and the quality of service in the public sector. The Danish public sector has a particularly ambitious digitization agenda. However, broad policy initiatives from governments and agencies are not implemented uniformly across public sector organizations, but can be seen as an ongoing cross-sectoral managerial task. The task is the same – digitization needs to be 'realized' – but it is subject to different organizational realities and different interpretations among both managers and employees. This chapter is based on a qualitative study of how the digitization agenda is realized across very heterogeneous public organizations in Denmark. The term realized refers to the idea that digitization strategies have to be translated and turned into organizational change projects. Methodologically, the project raises the question of how we may understand the organizational implications of an ambitious policy program, which is supposed to transform an entire public sector. Digitization is conceptualized as a practice characterized by both "programmatic (normative)" and "technological (operational)" elements (Power, 1999: 6). The values and everyday day work connected to digitization are at the same time crosscutting and diverse (Strathern 2000). To understand the realization of digitization policy, it is insufficient to study either the policy level or the implementation level in single organizations. The chapter argues for – and illustrates – a multi-sited (Marcus, 1995), mixed methods research strategy combining documentary research, interviews with managers across public organizations, observation of cross-sectorial managerial meetings, and ethnographic studies in a public organization where employees are shadowed and interviewed. The chapter reflects on the value of combining ethnographic studies (to capture taken-for-granted, non-articulated practices) with interviews and documentary research (to extend the 'where' and the 'what' of ethnography) to understand the managerial task of realizing policy agendas.

References

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