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P1: AI, Society, Governance, Education & Working Life

5. Who's the Problem? The Construction of the Immoral Welfare User in the Automated Welfare State

Authors: Ellinor Blom Lussi¹

Affiliations: 1. Technology and Society, Lund University, Sweden

Abstract: Commonly referred to as a cradle-to-grave system, the Swedish welfare state is designed to be present from the day that you are born, to the moment you die. It is argued that the Swedish welfare system is founded on the assumption that Swedish citizens, for the most part, only claim welfare benefits they have the right to. More recently, however, this line of reasoning has been increasingly problematized with references to the high levels of inaccurate welfare payments. To this end, the Swedish Payments Agency was established. The newly established authority seeks to prevent, forestall and detect inaccurate welfare payments using system-wide data analysis. As such, it is here approached as an automated welfare surveillance scheme. Algorithms, in general, has been argued to carry the potential to be discriminatory and harmful and automated welfare surveillance, specifically, has been argued to focus on the most vulnerable and most marginalized in society. Rather than seeking to understand the algorithms used for surveillance, this study emphasises the societal context in which the surveillance technology operates in.

Drawing on Richard Titmuss' work on the social division of welfare this paper recognizes that welfare and consequently welfare (ab)users and welfare surveillance are constructs, and that they, rather than reflecting the 'naturalness' of things, reflects expressions of power. As such, it calls for the critical examination of the way the Swedish public sector discursively creates welfare problems. Drawing on the context of the Swedish welfare state, this paper explores how the Swedish Payments Agency discursively constructs the 'issue' of inaccurate welfare payments. Utilizing the framework of What's the Problem Represented to be (WPR) this paper analyses knowledge reports on inaccurate welfare payments produced and published by the Swedish Payments Agency in order to answer the question of who is constructed as the problem when solving the 'problem' of inaccurate welfare payments using automated welfare surveillance in Sweden.

This paper finds that in the knowledge reports, 'inaccurate welfare payments' is represented as a problem attributable to those applying for benefits. This not only departs from earlier notions of welfare recipients as generally rule-abiding but also constructs some welfare recipients as deviant. By constructing welfare recipient as deviant, the knowledge reports on inaccurate welfare payments also simultaneously produce the moral welfare recipient. While it is common to attribute (automated) welfare surveillance to neoliberal rationalities, this paper argues that, in a Swedish context, such an interpretation risks overlooking important historical continuities. Instead, this paper suggests that automated welfare surveillance in the Swedish context is better understood as a continuation of the Nordic welfare model.