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Am I Worth it? Social Investment Discourse as a Frame of Interaction in Welfare Programs for Young People with Drug Problems

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Abstract

Aim: Social investments are strategic allocation of resources to welfare programs, such as education or health care, expected to generate social and economic returns. In Europe, social investment has become a well established policy paradigm, yet research has rarely examined how it impacts how state–citizen relationships are understood. This article explores how the social investment discourse functions as a frame of interaction within welfare programs for young people with drug problems in Denmark.

Design: Theoretically, the article draws on Foucault's concept of discourse, Goffman's theory of frames and Hacking's notion of looping effects. Empirically, it presents two contrasting cases of young people with drug problems who position themselves as, respectively, good and bad investments.

Results: The social investment discourse provides some youths and their relatives with means to legitimize requests for help; it enables a selfpresentation as "a good investment", which can strengthen their sense of entitlement to welfare. In contrast, others come to view themselves as "bad investments". For them, the discourse frames programs as a waste of money, which risk to undermine the sense of entitlement among individuals who fear they might fail to benefit from welfare programs.

Conclusions: Social investment is a policy paradigm; it is not designed as a frame of self-presentation. Nevertheless, once its rationality enters public discourse, it produces new interactional frames and subject positions. An unintended but significant effect is that the discourse may stigmatize marginalized citizens, undermine their sense of entitlement to welfare, and weaken the universal, normative and rights-based principles underpinning the Nordic welfare states.

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Keywords
discourse, drug treatment, frame, governmental rationality, self-presentation, sense of entitlement, social investment, stigma, young people, welfare states

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Introduction

The core idea of social investment is that the provision of welfare services can generate both social and economic returns, and social policy should be viewed as investments rather than costs (Morel et al., 2012). For instance, social investments in drug treatment programs can enhance recipients' quality of life (a social return) at the same time as reducing public expenditures related to crime and poor health (an economic return) (Jacobsen et al., 2022). Over the past two decades, social investment policies have been implemented in education, health care and other welfare service sectors across Europe with the Nordic countries often described as frontrunners (Horn & Van Kersbergen, 2022).

Previous research on social investment tends to focus on its intended returns, such as whether investment policies generate more and better jobs (Nelson & Stephens, 2012). Yet social investment is more than a set of policies that may deliver the intended returns or not. It constitutes a governmental rationality with the potential to recast state–citizen relationships. From an anthropological perspective, welfare regimes are systems that organize life-sustaining relationships between individuals, families and the state (McKowen, 2020). Within this system, "social investment figures as a sociocultural and moral regime that encourages the 'making up' (Hacking, 1986) of certain kinds of people" (McKowen, 2025; p. 555). Social investment policies position citizens as objects in which the welfare state may invest in to achieve social and economic returns. Most citizens will desire to "contribute to society" and seek "to avoid a sense of indebtedness to the state" (McKowen, 2020; p. 128). Being cast as a burden to society is profoundly undesirable for most people.

This study explores how the social investment discourse can shape self-presentations and everyday interactions in drug treatment for young people in Denmark. Drawing on a case study methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2006), it uses the power of examples to examine how the discourse appears in citizens' own reasoning about their position within the welfare system. This represents a novel and unconventional approach to social investment, shifting analytical attention from the measurable objectives of policy to the subjective experiences of those addressed by it. In doing so, the study investigates how the social investment discourse can seep into people's understanding of themselves and their worth as members of society. Although the citizen perspective has been largely neglected in social investment research, it is crucial to foreground, as framing welfare services through a social investment lens risks generating unintended, yet potentially significant, effects.

Denmark is often highlighted as "a social investment state" par excellence (Abrahamson, 2015; Kvist, 2015; Larsen & de la Porte, 2022) and the investment rationality has become common-sensical in Danish public policy and social work (Nissen et al., 2023). A comparative study (Hellman, 2021) showed that mass media discourse in Denmark is underpinned by an ethos focused on the societal contract and threats of poor economic prioritization; "A feature in the Danish material was the construct of the WFS [welfare state] in terms of monetary transaction exercises" (Hellman, 2021; p. 168). Another comparative study on lay welfare attitudes found that:

> Particular to the Danish case, universalism is ascribed high worth as a societal investment in individuals making society "richer", "more productive" and "competitive" […] Welfare institutions, in particular education and healthcare, are

> justified by increasing general wealth, tax revenues, and national competitive advantage by investment in the health and ability of individuals. […] Danes […] see welfare services and benefits as investments in competitiveness, market position and future profit. (Frederiksen, 2018)

The emphasis on economic logics found to be prevalent in Danish mass media discourse and lay welfare state perceptions contrasts with a greater focus on values like solidarity, equality and "trygghet" (security) found in Sweden (Frederiksen, 2018; Hellman, 2021). The strong presence of social investment rationality in public discourse, makes Denmark an apt context for this case study.

Drug treatment for young people represents a particularly relevant welfare service for this case study because the target group is associated with at least two potential mechanisms for social investment returns. First, the age of the target population implies that a return to education and employment can enable them to contribute productively to society for many years to come. Second, their drug problems entail risks of public expenses related to, for example, crime and poor health that could be prevented through effective interventions. A Danish research report estimated that a drug treatment program reduces public expenses about 27,000 DKK (about 3700 €) per participant due to avoided costs to, for example, hospitalization (Jacobsen et al., 2022). In this way, drug treatment can function as a form of social investments that both enhances desired social outcomes and reduces public expenses.

Finally, drug treatment for young people serves as a valuable case as it involves citizens from diverse social class backgrounds, and previous research indicates that class differences shape how individuals relate to the state. Studies suggest that middle-class youth tend to exhibit a stronger sense of entitlement in their interactions with authorities, while young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often display a sense of constraint when engaging with authorities (Lareau, 2011; Lavee, 2022; Rollwagen & Mayhew, 2025). The concept of entitlement partly overlaps with deservingness. A sense of deservingness reflects an *outside-in* perception of one's social worth, shaped by external standards such as social norms, whereas a sense of entitlement reflects an *inside-out* perception, grounded in personal beliefs about one's own legitimacy or rights. As a welfare service logic, social investment rationality may be negotiated in interactions between professionals and clients, shaping professionals' perceptions of clients' deservingness. Likewise, citizens may express varying forms of *inside-out* entitlement in these same encounters.

The next, section summarizes previous research on social investment, and it is followed by a presentation of the theoretical framework that draws on Foucault's concept of discourse and Goffman's theory on interactional frames. The analysis includes two empirical case studies involving young men with drug problems: one who presents himself as a good investment and another who describes himself as a waste of money. The article concludes with a discussion of how the case studies suggest that an unintended consequence of the social investment rationality may be the stigmatization and weakening of marginalized citizens' sense of entitlement to welfare.

Previous Research on Social Investment

The historical roots of social investment as a form of governmental rationality run deep in the Nordic welfare states (Andersson, 2010; van Kersbergen & Kraft, 2017). Some scholars trace its origins to the 1930s, particularly to the early years of the social-democratic Swedish welfare state and the Myrdals' conception of "productive social policy" (Morel et al., 2012). Scholars focusing on Denmark argue that, as early as the nineteenth century, "Danish elites articulated social investments in peasants and workers as part of the solution for augmenting economic growth" (Martin & Chevalier, 2022;

p. 805; see also Bjerre, 2025; Sevelsted & Krarup, 2025).

From the late 1990s onward, the idea of social investment gained international traction among researchers and policymakers. In the USA, James Heckman played a pivotal role in promoting early investments in education and childcare (Michel, 2015). In Europe, Gøsta Esping-Andersen proposed a new welfare state architecture centered on the rationality of social investment (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). Social investment policies have since been implemented across European welfare states (Hemerijck, 2015).

Previous research on social investment roughly divides into three camps. One group of scholars theorize social investment policies as part of "the good society" (Esping-Andersen, 2002; p. 1) and "a fully operative policy paradigm […] [that] holds a promise of a more inclusive and protective, family and gender friendly, employment-centered growth strategy" (Hemerijck, 2015; p. 254). Second, in interplay with the first group, empirical scholars identify typologies of social investment strategies (Garritzmann et al., 2022) and evaluate their effects quantitatively; some scholars identify positive effects, such as confirming the capacity of social investment to produce more and better jobs (Nelson & Stephens, 2012), while others find perverse effects such as Matthew effects (Cantillon, 2011) implying the middle-class benefits while the capacity of social investment "to reach the most disadvantaged is severely limited" (Bonoli et al., 2017; p. 74). Finally, a few scholars offer a comprehensive critique of social investment as a neoliberal policy framework; "social investment […] represent less an argument in the democratic debate on the good society than the attempt to convince financial investors of the economic importance of social policy" (Laruffa, 2022; p. 485).

Previous research has rarely examined how social investment shapes citizens' self-understanding within the welfare system; specifically, how they may internalize a conception of themselves as objects of investment and what implications this holds for their sense of entitlement to support. To date, no study has explored how the social investment discourse functions as a frame for everyday interaction in drug treatment. This gap in knowledge may reflect the fact that, as a policy paradigm, social investment was not designed to serve as an interactional frame (Hemerijck, 2015). Nevertheless, a rationality that figures prominently in public discourse holds the potential to shape citizens' self-perceptions, even if unintentionally. Illustrating this, recent research on active labor market policies shows that the social investments targeting unemployed citizens can inadvertently evoke feelings of shame among recipients who come to perceive themselves as "bad investments" (Pultz, 2025). More research adopting a citizen perspective is needed to understand how the implementation of social investment policies affects vulnerable groups in society. Both the intended and unintended effects must be clarified to ensure that future welfare state policies are developed on a well-informed basis.

Theoretical Concepts and Their Application

The study is grounded in theories of governmental rationality, discourse, framing and looping effects. Each of these theoretical concepts are explicated in this section and related to the empirical field of analysis.

Michel Foucault (1991) used the term governmental rationality to describe a system of thinking about the practice of government. Aligned with this, I approach social investment as a logic for how societies should be governed. Specifically, I see it as a way of thinking and talking that is built around promises of resolving the tension between economic and social interest (Daggers, 2022; Laruffa, 2022). A discourse "limits and forms the sayable" (Foucault, 1991; p. 59), enabling policymakers and researchers to talk about double bottom

lines; instead of having to make hard choices between e.g., economic growth and social justice, governments can make investments intended to bring about positive economic *and* social returns (Hansen & Triantafillou, 2011).

Multiple systems of thinking always co-exist (Foucault, 1991; p. 54), making it important to emphasize that the social investment discourse operates alongside other discourses, such as the discourse of rights (Manokha, 2009) and the values of universalism (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). In Denmark, as in other Nordic welfare states, the provision of care for vulnerable citizens has long been discursively intertwined with normative values. Successive Danish Social Democratic prime ministers have invoked the moral slogan "A welfare society should be judged by how it takes care of its most vulnerable members" (Frederiksen, 2023; Rasmussen, 1997; Thorning-Schmidt, 2008). Yet, over the past decade, prominent members of social-democratic governments have also explicitly drawn on the social investment discourse. For instance, Social Democratic ministers published a book entitled *It Pays to Invest in People* (Halsboe-Jørgensen & Rosenkrantz-Theil, 2018),[1] and across the political spectrum there is broad agreement on pursuing "an investment oriented social policy for children and young people" (Danish Ministry of Social Affairs [Socialministeriet], 2021; p. 17).

Erving Goffman (1974) introduced the concept of frame as a tool for understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences. A frame is an interpretive schema that helps individuals decipher "what is it that is going on here?". This study is particularly interested in how the rationality of social investment frames, is referred to, and, shows up in drug treatment for young people. Participants in a social interaction make self-presentations using impression management; more or less consciously, skillfully and successfully participants seek to shape how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1959). The frame determines what lines of interaction that are appropriate or meaningful in a given situation, and it shapes how individuals understand their roles and the expectations placed on them. When interaction in welfare services is framed as social investment, citizens may strive to use impression management to present as good investments. However, frames can also be disrupted or broken by participants (e.g., if a professional or citizen introduce a reinterpretation of the situation). When a frame of interaction is broken it may lead to confusion, discomfort or even conflict as the participants struggle to establish a shared understanding of the situation.

Ian Hacking (2004) demonstrates how Foucault's orientation to discourse in the abstract complement Goffman's focus on face-to-face interaction. In his studies of "making up people" (Hacking, 1986), he shows how discourses frame self-presentations; new modes of description or categories create new possibilities for who you can be and what you can do. Discourses can open possibilities but they can also compromise and limit possibilities. For example, Hacking explains how a discourse on genetic tendency to crime may induce fatalism and resignation in people that are classified as high-risk (Hacking, 2004; p. 298). The impact of discourses stems from "the almost-too-boring-to-state fact that people are aware of what is said about them, thought about them, done to them" (Hacking, 1999; p. 31). Hacking introduces the concept of looping effects to capture this dynamic; classifications (e.g., classifications of high-risk youth) change the people classified and over time the changed people cause classifications themselves to be redrawn (Hacking, 2004; p. 279).

This study will analyze how the social investment discourse makes it possible for young people with drug problems to present themselves as objects of investment. The study takes up the question posed by Hacking: "Does the availability of a classification, a label, a word or phrase, open certain possibilities, or perhaps close off others?" (Hacking, 2004; p. 285) and it pursues the answers to the question through the empirical case studies outlined in the following section.

Case Studies

Since 2005, I have carried out qualitative research in Danish welfare programs for citizens in vulnerable positions due to drug problems, homelessness and poor mental health (Andersen, 2020; Andersen & Bengtsson, 2019; Andersen & Järvinen, 2007). My research includes a collection of qualitative data (ethnography, interviews) with citizens enrolled in welfare programs and the professionals who work with them as well as document analysis of policies that underpin the services. Over the past decades, I have witnessed the discourse of social investment gain ground among scholars and policymakers as well as professionals and citizens interacting in welfare programs.

This case study is motivated by a personal sense of puzzlement: what unintentional effects may accompany the readily embracement of the social investment discourse? The social investment rationality is used to motivate resource allocation to welfare: Advocating for generous funding of, for example, drug treatment is compelling when linked to arguments that it will pay off by reducing public expenses (Jacobsen et al., 2022). Hence, the social investment discourse appears useful for anyone (policymakers, professionals, citizens) seeking to encourage funding of welfare services. The flipside is that public spending can also be framed as bad investments. This darker side of social investment has in my view received surprisingly little attention in research and public debate.

For this study, I have selected two cases. The first case, Felix, explicitly presents himself as a good investment, while the second, Noah, describes the drug treatment he has received as a waste of money. Felix has middleclass background with supportive parents and he still lives at home at age 19. In contrast, Noah has a disadvantaged background; his father has died, he has little contact with his mother, he has been in out-of-home care from age 13 years, and, at age 17 years, he is sofa surfing among friends.

The first case (Felix) is retrieved from a qualitative, longitudinal study involving 25 young people with complex needs. The original part of this study included 40 semi-structured interviews with young people (25) and caseworkers (15) as well as 5 months of daily ethnographic fieldwork in drug treatment programs for young people (Andersen, 2014). Some young people and their relatives have been re-interviewed in subsequent research projects (Andersen, 2020). The second case (Noah) is retrieved from a cross-sectional study involving 106 Danish citizens with drug problems who participated in semi-structured interviews (Andersen & Kessing, 2019). Most of the data used in this study are from 2016, but data collection in the longitudinal study providing the first case spanned 5 years.

The cases are retrieved from research projects that collected semi-structured qualitative interviews most often lasting between 45 and 90 min. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observations were carried out as multi-sided ethnography (Marcus, 1995), as I observed young people with complex needs interacting with professionals in various welfare state settings such as drug treatment, psychiatry and municipal job centers. I primarily assumed the role of a participant observer, enabling me to write fieldnotes during interactions (Seim, 2024).

At the time these research projects were commenced, there were no institutional boards for the ethical approval of social science studies. However, the studies are registered by the Danish Data Protection Agency and were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The participants were informed about the project, their rights as research participants and all participants provided oral or written consent. Felix and Noah are pseudonyms and identifiable details are not shared.

The cases of Felix and Noah are selected strategically as "maximum variation cases" (Flyvbjerg, 2006; p. 230). Accordingly, the case study design does not rely on a random sample of typical cases but a strategic selection of cases that represent maximum variation in relation to dimensions of particular analytical

Table 1. Overview of Dimensions that Motivated Case Selection.

	Felix	**Noah**
Dimensions exhibiting *maximum variation*	Felix presents himself (supported by his parents) as "a good investment". Felix has a middle-class background.	Noah presents himself (prompted by a caseworker) as "a waste of money". Noah has a disadvantaged background.
Dimensions exhibiting *similarity*	Felix is a white, Danish citizen. In his late teens, Felix experiences problems related to drug use, criminal activities and poor mental health. Felix is not in education, employment or training when enrolled in drug treatment.	Noah is a white, Danish citizen. In his late teens, Noah experiences problems related to drug use, criminal activities and poor mental health. Noah is not in education, employment or training when enrolled in drug treatment.

interest combined with similarity in other dimensions. The selection is based on a familiarity with the data and a reading of all transcripts. The cases are selected because they are similar and different in ways that make them ideal for this study. Table 1 presents an overview.

The analytical interest of this study is the social investment discourse, and in line with this, the cases selected for this study represent maximum variation in relation to the social investment discourse (Daggers, 2022) and socio-economic background as an important factor for individuals' sense of entitlement (Lareau, 2011). The cases are similar in other dimensions: Felix and Noah are both white Danish citizens in their late teens who identify as males. Both experience problems related to illegal drug use and crime (violence, illegal drug trade), both receive drug treatment, and neither is in education, employment or training at the point in time that they are enrolled in drug treatment.

In analyzing the data in these two cases, I have oriented attention to sections where the social investment discourse appears to be at play. Other discourses are also at play in the welfare programs, and I elaborate on these in the discussion, while the analysis focuses on how the social investment discourse works as a frame for interaction and self-presentation. I refer to both Felix and Noah as citizens in vulnerable positions due to their complex needs in relation to drug problems, poor mental health and exclusion from education, employment and training. However, due to his disadvantaged background, Noah is part of a more marginalized group than Felix.

The purpose of the case study is not to generalize but to benefit from "the force of example" (Flyvbjerg, 2006; p. 228). In line with the case study methodology, I have chosen to zoom in on two cases to unpack human, context-dependent experience. In other words, the cases serve as empirical examples of how the social investment discourse can frame interaction and self-presentation.

Felix: A Good Investment

Felix, aged 19 years, experiences drug problems, poor mental health and faces criminal charges related to violence. Felix and his father contact the municipality in the hope of getting help to relieve his problems. In an interview, Felix's father explains:

> We entered [the municipal office] and said that we had been doing some research on drug treatment options. It gives the caseworker a certain impression of Felix's network when I arrive well-dressed and speak eloquently. … We [Felix and his father] talked about it before and after [the meeting] and we were very happy and relieved that we got all

> [the treatment services] we asked for. The caseworker agreed to the presentation we made of Felix: "Failing to invest now is a mistake because this is a young man who messed up but he's an intelligent young man who can certainly have a future – but [he] will not have a future if he doesn't get help now".

Felix's father uses the concept of "invest" when he explains how they successfully advocated for welfare services. This choice of word can serve several functions. In relation to the caseworker who holds the authority to grant or refuse the desired services, the concept suggests that the cost of helping Felix should not be viewed as an expense but rather as an investment bound to produce returns. In relation to Felix, the concept may signal a consolidating belief in his son's future potential and gesture goodwill in relation to his readiness to help. He assigns importance to how they entered the meeting well-prepared and actively sought to direct impression management by how they looked and talked. This may be interpreted as a way to deflect the stigma associated with drug problems (Lloyd, 2013) and a flagging of Felix's social capital in the form of a network that includes supportive parents. A discourse "limits and forms the sayable" (Foucault, 1991; p. 59) and embedding the presentation of Felix in the social investment discourse enables them to make the point that failing to invest in Felix would be "a mistake". In this way, the social investment discourse is used strategically to motivate and validate Felix's entitlement to welfare services.

Felix is granted his preferred drug treatment option, and, as an ethnographer I participate in the subsequent enrolment session. In my ethnographic fieldnotes, I write:

> [Felix] uses words like "assessment" in the conversation. He explains that he has been to an assessment with another treatment provider – even though Martin [the welfare professional in charge of the enrolment] has not previously used that word. He [Felix] also uses words like "spheres" and "empathy".

As an ethnographer, I find Felix's vocabulary noteworthy because most of the young people at the drug treatment institution do not use this kind of words. In terms of appearance – tattoos, clothing, etc. – Felix does not stand out from his peers at the treatment institution where the enrolment takes place. However, he distinguishes himself through his sophisticated language skills and his ability to pick up concepts and apply them competently. Naturally, individual communication styles vary from person to person, yet previous research also documents a class-based differences. Research shows that middle-class parents often socialize their children to take an active role in interaction with authority figures, to use a professional and reasoned language, to ask questions and assert their own perspectives thereby preparing them to navigate institutional contexts more effectively than youths from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds, who tend to remain more reserved and allow the professionals take the lead (Fauske et al., 2018; Lareau, 2011).

Based on the brief excerpt from my field diary, it is obviously not possible to determine whether Felix's linguistic skills helped him navigate more effectively the institutional context. Over time, however, my observations suggest that the ways Felix distinguishes himself from his peers are also recognized by the welfare professionals. In an interview with Robert, Felix's caseworker in the months following the enrolment session, I ask how he views the future prospects of the young people he works with. Drawing on more than a decade of professional experience, Robert replies:

> I think that for a large proportion [of the young people] nothing changes much. Honestly. Some will experience a complete detour – a small group completely devastated by escalating mental illness and […] they end up in the streets. [….] Then we have a group who do this [use drugs, engage in criminal activities] as a youth fling, who needs some support and then get on [with their lives] as either unskilled or skilled workers. And then a few may make it further. I work with one young

> person [Felix] at the moment who wants to pursue secondary education and he would like to go to university and I think that is not unrealistic.

Robert expresses a belief in Felix's potential to "make it further", and when I re-interview Felix during a follow-up study 5 years later, he is indeed attending university. Robert's prediction that Felix – unlike most of the other young people he encountered in drug treatment – could go on to pursue a university education proved accurate. This achievement was made possible by treatment programs that helped Felix manage his drug use and mental health challenges, as well as by various forms of public support over the years that enabled him to pursue a higher educational track. At age 24 years, he is doing well and is living in his own apartment with a girlfriend. Felix describes how facing criminal charges became a turning point in his life:

> It really was an unpleasant experience to be seen as a criminal, you know, and to be in [police] custody […]. It was *really* unpleasant. And it was probably that which … like [made me think] 'this is not for me – I can't do this'. It was a turning point, I believe.

Felix expresses a feeling of not belonging in the category of criminal youths with drug problems. He was involved in drug use, violence and criminal activities as part of a larger group of friends. At age 24 years, he remains in contact with some of the friends that he has known since childhood. He reflects on how his life trajectory over the past 5 years has come to contrast those of his friends:

> I'm from the decent part – well, not to be judgmental – the middle-class section of [X-city]. … In the northern part, where I grew up, you see townhouses, front-yard gardens and stuff like that, and the southern part is mostly apartments and […] more social deprivation. Those who came from the southern part come from social problem families, single providers and maybe had parents with drug or crime issues of their own. They are the ones who continued on the [same] track [crime, drugs, violence]. Then there's someone like me who has a privileged background: I dip my toe in it and have a taste but then pulled out. They stay in it. It's pretty obvious.

The social investment discourse enabled Felix – supported by his father and case worker – to present himself as a good investment. Within the discourse of social investment, it would be "a mistake" not to invest in Felix, as he had the potential to obtain an education and become a productive member of society, yet he would not have this future "if he doesn't get help now". Over the years, the welfare system invested substantial resources in Felix to improve his wellbeing (a social return) and pursue higher education (potentially yielding high income; an economic return). When reflecting on his own trajectory, Felix emphasizes the significance of his middle-class background, noting that it was "pretty obvious" that someone like him would move away from drug use and criminal activities ("this is not for me"), while his friends from disadvantaged backgrounds tended to "stay in". The discussion will relate the findings to Hacking's concept of looping effects to discuss whether Felix's recovery may *become* more likely because he, his relatives and caseworkers expected that he is more likely to succeed than youths from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Noah: A Waste of Money

In the case of Noah, the social investment discourse is inverted; rather than framing welfare services as profitable investments, they are portrayed as an unproductive use of public money. While the overall perspective on social investment is similar to that in Felix's case – a view of welfare services as investments that may yield returns – Noah presents himself in a markedly different way than Felix when it comes to his own position within the welfare system.

Noah was granted drug treatment by municipal referral authorities, but conferred in an interview that "It's not like, it got better from it, so it [the drug treatment] was actually a waste of money for them". When Noah talks about the drug treatment as a waste of money, he is presenting the statement as his own words. However, his presentation of the various forms of help he has received, is also prompted by a long trajectory of interaction with his municipal caseworker. Noah started smoking cannabis when he was 12 years old, he has received various forms of counselling and was placed in an out-of-home care institution at age 13 years. Due to involvement in illegal drug trade and the possession of a knife, he was moved to a secured institution at age 14 years, then to another out-of-home care institution and later to a foster family. Noah did not thrive in the foster family and eloped:

> When I ran away [from the foster family], I called her [my caseworker], and she said to me – quite frankly – that they [the municipality] were tired of spending money on me, and they didn't really want to do it anymore.

At age 17 years, Noah has been staying at a friend's apartment for several months because he does not have a place of his own to live. His caseworker has suggested that he could return to his foster family but in Noah's conception "that option is like being evicted to the street, really".

Noah's caseworker is employed in the municipality where his mother lives and where Noah formally has address (not by his mother, but at the municipality). His caseworker has organized a mentor in the municipality where Noah is currently living who is supposed to help him find a place to live and get back to school. Noah smokes a lot of cannabis, uses cocaine and MDMA, and is not too optimistic about his future prospects. He conveys:

> I am probably never gonna quit completely [using drugs], I don't think so, no, I probably won't […]. They [the municipality] have given up on me […]. While they are still looking, I am living on the street. They don't know, that I have a place to stay [at my friend's place]. […] She said it straight-out to me: They are tired of spending money on me […]. Also, I think they have spent at least a million DKK on me. At least. But I think it was also because of that secured institution. That place costed them more than 100,000 DKK (about 13,500 €) a month […] They cannot make you do anything you don't want to do. It is more like, if people want to, then things happen, but if there is no willpower …

In reflecting on how much money he has costed the municipality – and their growing frustration with continuing to fund him – Noah reproduces a social investment discourse that frames him as an economic burden rather than a worthwhile investment. This may indicate an internalization of the social investment discourse, suggesting that Noah has come to see himself as an object of investment. Alternatively, it could reflect a strategic use of the discourse, allowing Noah to keep his caseworker at a distance so he can continue using drugs and living with his friend, rather than being returned to a foster family or institution with the restrictions on his behavior this would entail. Most likely, both dynamics are at play. Noah has, to some extent, accepted a conception of himself as an object of investment, along with the stigmatization associated with being an economic burden and failing to deliver returns by profiting from the welfare services provided by the authorities. At the same time, Noah may also be using the discourse strategically to his own advantage. By positioning himself outside the reach of the social investment state, he gains a degree of freedom.

In responding to the caseworker who asserted that the municipality is tired of using money on him, Noah could have challenged the social investment discourse that link allocation of resources to expectations of return. For instance, he could have turned to a discourse of rights (Manokha, 2009). Activating this

discourse would have enabled him to insist on his entitlement to getting help regardless of his prospects of success. Even if he might not ever completely quit using drugs, he is still legally entitled to getting help both to manage his drug use and in relation to his mental health problems and homelessness. He could also have invoked a normative discourse (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005), arguing that the Danish welfare state has a moral obligation to help someone in his vulnerable position; a 17-year-old without parental support or stable housing who struggles with mental health and drug-related problems.

A close reading of Noah's assertion may indicate some indignation. His remark "While they are still looking, I am living on the street. They don't know, that I have a place to stay" suggests a view that the municipality ought to help him as he highlights how the municipality witness a youth presumably living on the street without taking action to help him. The remark disrupts the framing of the situation rooted in the social investment discourse and suggests that Noah feels he is not getting the support he is entitled to (legally and morally) and that his caseworker is too absent in her role.

When a frame of interaction is broken it leads to confusion, discomfort or even conflict, and most people seek to quickly reestablish a shared understanding of the situation. Noah's disruption of the frame is subtle and followed by a realignment with the caseworkers framing of him. Rather than objecting to the presentation of himself as a "waste of money", Noah takes responsibility by reasoning that his lack of willpower implies that welfare authorities actually cannot help him. When he emphasizes how much money the municipality has already spent to help him – seemingly without much effect – Noah legitimizes and rationalizes the municipality's unwillingness to spend more money in his unlikely-to-succeed case. He appears to accept that his deservingness has been degraded. Hence, the dynamics of looping effects may mean that the municipality's reluctance to invest in the case of Noah implies that he may *become* less likely to succeed because he is classified as a risky or even bad investment.

Discussion

This study launches a new type of discussion on social investment by asking: how does social investment discourse frame interaction and self-presentations in welfare services involving vulnerable groups? Initially, this might seem like a strange question because social investment is not intended to serve as an interactional frame of self-presentation but merely as a rationality that guide welfare policies. Through the power of examples, the case studies in this article illustrated how the social investment discourse nevertheless can frame everyday interaction. The case of Felix shows how the discourse may be used to frame a citizen as a good investment, while the case of Noah shows how welfare programs for citizens in vulnerable citizens can be framed as a waste of money.

Hacking's theory on looping effects offers a way to disentangle how these unintended effects are produced through an interplay of knowledge, power and everyday practice. Social investment discourse creates new ways of talking about the provision of welfare services, and when "new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence". (Hacking, 1986; p. 231). New modes of classifications are often produced by scholars and implemented by policymakers (Hacking, 2004). In this case, scholars such as Esping-Andersen (2002) formed a discourse that made welfare "thinkable" as social investment, while legislators like Halsboe-Jørgensen and Rosenkrantz-Theil (2018) implement the rationality in Danish welfare state policy. Caught in the loop between production of knowledge (scholars) and the exercise of power (policymakers), citizens in vulnerable positions are made up as objects of investments.

The case studies suggest that a looping effect of the social investment discourse may be that middleclass citizens like Felix – perceived by

themselves, their relatives and welfare professionals as likely to benefit from welfare services – can more easily present themselves as good investments and may even come to *feel* more entitled to welfare than marginalized citizens such as Noah. In response to the question "Am I worth it?", someone like Felix is likely to confidently affirm their worthiness of receiving public support, whereas youths like Noah might not. This looping effect runs counter to scholars' and policymakers' stated intentions with social investment policies. Scholars have stated that "one of the main aims of the social investment approach is to minimize the intergenerational transfer of poverty" (Morel et al., 2012; p. 11)", while policymakers assert: "Our motivation is to fight social inequality" (Halsboe-Jørgensen & Rosenkrantz-Theil, 2018; p. 8).

Hence, the case studies suggest that the social investment discourse produce not only unintentional but potentially counterproductive effects. Social investments are intended to minimize the intergenerational transfer of poverty and reduce social inequality. And yet, in everyday practice, the discourse implies that young people from more resourceful backgrounds are able to present themselves as worthwhile investments, whereas disadvantaged young people – who struggle to benefit from welfare programs – risk being perceived by themselves, their relatives and welfare state professionals as a waste of resources. The social investment discourse thereby risks to exacerbate social inequality.

The social investment discourse coexists with other welfare state discourses. Scholars and policymakers who advocate social investments often present their policy recommendations as progressive alternatives to neoliberal policies of rolling back of the welfare state (Hemerijck, 2017). The social investment rationality emerges as beneficial when compared to an alternative where welfare programs for citizens in vulnerable positions risk severe budget cuts because social investment policies aim to promote rather than retrench welfare programs (Laruffa, 2022). Other streams of welfare state discourses center on rights (Manokha, 2009) or universalism (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). Framing welfare in the discourse of rights in a universal welfare state has the potential to mitigate the risk of stigmatizing some citizens as unworthy of investments. The discourse of universalism indicates that all citizens are entitled. These alternative discourses persist, but social investment rationality may spur de-universalization even in the Nordic countries that have been strongholds of the universal welfare state (Van Kersbergen & Kraft, 2017).

How can we understand the way social investment discourse challenges universalism and rights-based welfare? Following Foucault (2008), the shift towards social investment can be seen as an economization of social problems that allow welfare programs to be (e)valuated in terms of efficiency and legitimize the elimination of wasteful expenditures. Economization of social problems encourages policymakers to think like economists focusing on cost–benefit and economic growth which in effect crowd out the values of universalism, equality and democratic participation (Berman, 2022). Francesco Laruffa has demonstrated the consequences of economization in homelessness policies. He compared European Union policy documents before and after the European Commission adopted the agenda *Confronting Homelessness* in 2013 as part of the 'Social Investment Package' and found:

> [T]he Commission shifts the emphasis from a rights-informed approach to an economic-based understanding: rather than a violation of fundamental rights and of human dignity [references to previous policy documents], for the Commission homelessness is an "extreme manifestation of poverty and social exclusion which reduces a person's *productive potential* and is a *waste of human capital*" (European Commission, 2013: 5). (Laruffa, 2021; p. 422)

The social investment discourse changes the justification for the welfare programs aiming to

help people in homelessness: "the language of fundamental rights that characterized earlier interventions are complemented and partly replaced by the emphasis on the economic benefits of combating homelessness" (Laruffa, 2021; p. 424). The social investment discourse did not indicate a change of programs; policy documents before and after the discursive shift point to the same types of housing-led programs. Neither does the discourse imply a retraction of universal rights. The discourse "merely" changes the justification of the programs by emphasizing the economic benefits.

If the social investment discourse is successfully used to justify funding of welfare programs for citizens in vulnerable positions, why should this be a cause for concern? The case studies presented in this article illustrate why. Danish citizens in need of drug treatment are legally entitled to receive a treatment offer according to the Social Service Act, chapter 18, §101. Formally, Felix and Noah are equally entitled to help. In practice, however, the discourse of social investment implies that Noah feels less entitled as his odds of profiting appear poor, while Felix's self-presentation as a "good investment" improves his odds of getting back on track because it helps him motivate welfare state authorities to invest resources in him. In this way, the discourse of social investment bolster self-fulling prophesies; "good investments" attract funding while risky or "bad investment" deter them to avoid a percieved risk of wasting of welfare state resources.

Furthermore, the discursive shift in justifications from rights to an economic rationality may impact definitions of welfare program target groups. This is put to the fore in formalized social investment programs. For example, a program funded by the public Danish Social Investment Foundation defines the target group as young people in insecure housing who are not in education, employment or training and who experience problems with drug use and poor mental health. To be included in the welfare program funded by the social investment, the young people must "be motivated to create a change in their life situation" (Den Sociale Investeringsfond, 2021; p. 4, my translation). Furthermore, the young people's drug problems cannot be too extensive (Den Sociale Investeringsfond, 2021; p. 5).

From a rights and social justice perspective, using motivation as an inclusion criterion is controversial. Motivation is not an inherent quality but a disposition that is nurtured relationally in social encounters between professionals and individuals in need (Carstens, 2002). Indeed, a lack of motivation for treatment may be associated with greater needs for care. This criterion as well as the requirement that the young people cannot have too severe drug problems may legitimize otherwise undesired practices of creaming (Guul et al., 2021). If the key concern is to maximize the returns of money spend on welfare programs, it makes sense to exclude unmotivated young people with severe drug problems. From a social justice perspective, however, this is problematic because it means that help is not directed towards those most in need.

This study relies on a case study design. The methodology of case study has a limited capacity to generalize in comparison with quantitative and experimental research designs (Small, 2009). Accordingly, the claim of this study is not that all young people with drug problems present themselves as objects of investments. Competing discourses—such as the discourse on rights—also frame interactions within welfare programs. The case study design does not allow for a general, quantitative estimation of the impact of social investment discourse. The strength of case studies is the force of example that produce concrete, context-dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Social studies need case studies to understand human affairs: "[N]ot in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!" (Eysenck 1976, quoted in Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 224).

Through the power of examples, we learn how the social investment discourse can have unintentional effects in the local contexts of welfare programs. Once we understand how

these unintended effects are produced, we are better equipped to remedy them in future welfare policy. This study, for instance, suggests that the social investment discourse should be accompanied by a strong emphasis on marginalized citizens' rights and self-perceived worthiness to welfare support—regardless of their likelihood of achieving conventionally defined successful outcomes.

Conclusions

This article has explored and discussed how the social investment paradigm works as a frame for interaction in welfare programs for young people experiencing problems related to drug use. Through an empirically analysis of cases strategically selected to provide maximum variation, the study shows how the social investment discourse offers some young people a way to justify requests for help by allowing them to make self-presentations as a good investment, while other young people are led to view themselves as bad investments. The social investment rationality frames some welfare programs as a waste of money; this can stigmatize citizens who fail to benefit from the programs and may weaken their sense of entitlement to welfare.

Social investment is designed as a policy framework rather than a frame for self-presentation. Yet, the integration of its rationality into public discourse generates new ways of interacting and positioning oneself within welfare programs. The key message of this study is that social investment rationality may unintentionally sideline the most marginalized citizens, erode their sense of entitlement to welfare and undermine the universal, rights-based principles on which the Nordic welfare states are founded.

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Ethical Considerations

The data used in this article was collected at a time when there were no institutional boards for the approval of social science studies in Denmark. The research projects were registered by the Danish Data Protection Agency and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent to Participate

All participants received information about the research project and their rights as research participation. All participation in the research projects were voluntarily and based on oral or written consent from participants.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The participants did not consent for their data to be shared and, due to the sensitive nature, the qualitative data is not available.

Note

1. Ane Halboe Jørgensen and Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil have held prominent positions in the Danish Social Democratic Party since 2011, including the posts Minister of Education and

Minister of Employment (Halboe-Jørgensen) and Minister of Social Affairs and Housing (Rosenkrantz-Theil).

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