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The Activating Profession.

Coaching and Coercing in the Welfare Services

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Purpose: Activation policies are key elements of contemporary welfare reform throughout Europe. The paper aims to explore the consequences of more active and individualised welfare policies for conceptualisations of professionalism and competence in the welfare services.

Design/methodology/approach: The primary data are 25 qualitative interviews with street-level bureaucrats conducted in two local offices in The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). These data were supplemented by relevant policy documents. A distinction between the authorities discourse of organizational professionalism and the street-level bureaucrats' discourse of occupational professionalism is applied to structure the analysis.

Findings: Efforts to professionalize activation work takes place in the absence of a specific professional knowledge base to guide daily work. The article explores how relevant competence and skills are defined in such a context, both from the perspective of the authorities and from the front-level workers themselves. A key finding is that such competence tends to be defined in terms of the ability to manage communicative processes and relations. Paradoxically, the active turn in social policy with its emphasis on work and activity seems to entail a competence ideal that is inward-looking and psychologized.

Research limitations/implications: The qualitative approach implies limited generalisability in terms of statistical representativity. Furthermore, the results invite closer studies of the practical effects for social security users of the identified patterns.

Practical implications: Policy makers who aim to make welfare services more work orientated should look for ways of increasing street-level bureaucrats concrete relations with and practical experience from collaboration with employers. This may entail reviewing the practice of outsourcing the implementation of active measures to private actors.

Originality/value: The paper adds to a small literature on the implementation of activation policy in contemporary welfare states.

Keywords: Professionalism, activation policy, street-level bureaucrats, social welfare, Norway, governance.

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Introduction

Throughout Europe welfare states are strengthening their efforts at moving non-working people into employment (Bonoli and Natali 2012). Activation policies are a key element in these efforts. In a Scandinavian context, such programmes typically condition the right to income support on active participation in skill-enhancing activities with the aim of (re)integrating users into the labour market. The current tendency is that activation-style measures and conditions are being directed at ever wider target groups: the unemployed, lone parents, immigrants, social assistance recipients and people who are out of work due to poor health. For frontline workers in local welfare offices this means that a crucial part of their work consists in assessing claimants' ability to work and be activated, and devising plans for the claimants' progression from inactivity via active measures and into the labour market.

This active turn in social policy is changing both governance structures and the nature of frontline work in the welfare state. The intertwining of cash benefits and services means that traditional gatekeeping functions have been supplemented with new tasks. Claimants' work ability and future prospects on the labour market must be assessed. They need guidance in drawing up individual plans stating their future work aims and the qualifying activities that they are obliged to partake in to qualify for benefits and, ideally, to reach their aims. Case officers become supervisors who shall guide, motivate and advice their clients towards activity and work. Clients are reconfigured as users and participants, with rights and obligations to partake in designing their own transformations into employable and employed citizens. This constitutes a new work life for the welfare state's street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), including considerable space for individual adaptations and discretion. With this come claims both from the authorities and from the frontline itself that they need better and more adequate competence to deal with new challenges. In short, the claim is that activation work needs to be professionalized – both in the sense of being more knowledge based, but also in establishing adequate procedures and methods so that individualised supervision is provided in ways that are fair and point towards shared aims so that political aims are actually implemented.

There is no generally accepted and scientifically grounded knowledge base for the practice of activation. In van Berkel and colleagues' words: "no unambiguous answers exist to the question frontline workers are confronted with daily: what activation intervention works best for whom under what circumstances?" (van Berkel et al 2010: 455). Thus, whether activation

work meaningfully can be said to constitute professional work is debateable and obviously also dependent on how one defines professionalism (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012). In terms of professional associations, shared education or having a sheltered position in the labour market, there are few signs of an emergent activation profession. Nevertheless, a large number of public sector workers are working on implementing activation policies every day. What kind of competences and expertise are they applying in this work?

In this article I take as my starting point that there is a project of professionalization going on within activation work. But in the absence of a defined profession or a specific professional knowledge base, professionalism and competence appear as empty signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) that are open to be filled with different meanings. The question is thus how the problem of activation is defined in ways that enable street-level bureaucrats to claim a specific competence to diagnose and treat it? (cf. Abbott 1988) I study such attempts at defining the appropriate competence for activation work both from above and from below. How do authorities and frontline workers respectively define competence in the context of activation work? One finding is that relational competence and a tendency to psychologise activation work are prominent – both in the top-down and bottom-up perspective. Empirically the analysis is based in a case study of activation work with people who are out of work due to poor health in Norway. All the informants work in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration's (NAV) local frontline offices. However, many of the tools of activation policy are shared crossnationally, and the findings may resonate with cases also beyond this country.

Analytical perspectives on activation

The shift from passive to active welfare arrangements constitutes one of the most significant changes to European welfare states in the last decades. Assessments vary. Some applaud efforts to enable people to help themselves and achieve self-sufficiency; others question the efficiency or normative sustainability of such policies (Molander and Torsvik 2015). Such evaluations aside, the rise of activation policies can be interpreted in a wider context of citizenship restructuring, where *active* citizens are expected to work but also to manage their own health and well-being, participate in local communities, make active choices as consumers of welfare services and so on – thus being both liberated from the state and responsabilized for the welfare state's future (Clarke 2005).

When citizens' rights to income benefits are conditioned on participation in active measures as laid out in individual action plans, relations between citizens and welfare state are reconfigured through the idea of the *contract*. Clients are transformed into users, who are expected to be actively engaged in planning and designing their own plans for reintegration into the workforce, and who comes to agreement with the welfare services on the exact terms of his/her rights and obligations. In practice this implicates that rights and responsibilities are located in the (asymmetrical) relationships between case managers and his or her users. Thus these micro power relations of the welfare state become a crucial site for studying welfare reform (McDonald and Marston 2005).

The analytical framework of *governmentality* can be useful in understanding these changing political rationalities. In Nikolas Rose's and Mitchell Dean's reworkings of Foucault's notion of *gouvernementalité* they address power relations in the liberal state in terms such as governing through freedom, government at a distance, or government through self-steering individuals (Rose 1999, Dean 1999). The point is to address governing relations that operate through mobilising the self-steering properties of individuals. This fits well with activation policies which, in this perspective, are about devising ways in which to mobilise subjects to take active responsibility for themselves and, in particular, for their own way forward to labour market integration.

A particularly useful element of this approach is its focus on the techniques and technologies of government. This directs us to the *hows* of activation; the techniques governors employ to steer "on a distance". This is relevant to the purposes of this paper which addresses the knowledges and competences required in activation work. One example is the confessional technique, which invites the subject to gaze within herself, mobilising her own wishes and abilities. By treating activation participants as knowledgeable of themselves they are invited to take part in a government of self. This is a valuable addition to street-level perspectives that tend to focus the individual street-level bureaucrats' coping strategies in situations marred with endless demands, limited resources, inconsistent policy requirements and ethical dilemmas (Lipsky 1980). A governmentality approach, in contrast, asks how the problems street-level bureaucrats are supposed to solve are constituted and governed through a particular set of practices (McDonald and Marston 2005). As such it potentially brings in a wider perspective on the *street-level-organization* (Brodkin 2013), for example by tracing the significance of New Public Management (NPM) techniques such as performance monitoring.

Professions can be vital actors in practices of government and control. Fournier (1999) treats the language of professionalism as a discourse of power and control, which is entering new fields as a way of imposing new rules of conduct. Sanders and Harrison (2008) look at how occupational groups themselves can apply the language of professionalism to increase their legitimacy and status. Evetts (2009) makes a useful distinction between organizational professionalism and occupational professionalism – thus also indicating that these processes should be studied from a double perspective. Occupational professionalism is a discourse developed within the professional/occupational groups themselves, typically stressing the complexity of discretionary decision-making, collegial authority and the value of trust between practitioners and clients. Organizational professionalism, on the other hand, is a discourse of control typically used by managers in work organizations. It is a top-down type of professionalism used to steer work practices; “professionalism as a discourse of occupational change and control” (Evetts 2006: 138).

Yet, the observation that professionalism and competence building are tools of governance needs to be supplemented by empirical analyses of *how* the *content* of professional competence is constituted. If professional competence is to apply “somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases” (Abbott 1988: 9), what is this knowledge made up of? In short, it is time to turn to empirical work on the practice of activation work and, in particular, at how necessary competence and activation expertise is construed. Several authors have pointed out the relative scarcity of studies of the implementation of activation in a European context (Clarke 2005, van Berkel & van der Aa 2012, Tabin & Perriard 2016), and it is to this literature I aim to contribute.

The empirical context, data and methods

Scandinavian activation policies are often distinguished from Anglo-American neo-liberal workfare policies in being about enabling employment through human capital enhancement, rather than benefit cuts (Dean 2003). Torfing (1999) uses the term neo-statist as opposed to neo-liberal strategies in his analysis of Danish activation regimes. Also in Norway, the aim of freeing individuals from state dependency through activation is to happen by the means of intensive state activity in the shape of organisational reform and reconfigured frontline work.

Norwegian activation policies have entailed both large-scale organisational reform and reform of specific benefit schemes. The wide-ranging reform of The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) entailed the fusion of municipal social assistance services, and

national social security- and employment services into one organisation. Among the aims were to offer more a unified front-line («one stop shop») and a more work orientated set of services (St. prp. nr 46 (2004-2005)). At the same time as the organisational reform was rolled out, a new benefit scheme named work assessment allowance (*arbeidsavklaringspenger*, AAP) was also established for long-term sick. Participation in active measures (medical treatment and various work training schemes) is a condition for receiving the benefit. In other words, people with long-term health problems and reduced work ability are to be activated with the aim of increasing their return-to-work rates and avoid permanent disability.

Both the NAV-reform and the new and more active benefit schemes have come under fire for failing to deliver their promises of more activity and higher employment (e.g. Ekspertgruppen 2015, Mandal, Ofte, Jensen and Ose 2015). Part of the blame is placed in the frontline, as for example in a recent expert commission's report, which claimed that "NAV in their interaction with users place too little emphasis on possibilities in the labour market and too much emphasis on limitations of illness" (Ekspertgruppen 2015: 10).

In this study I have wanted to gain further insights into how activation happens in practice. Inspired by interpretative approaches to policy analysis (Yanow 2007) I was curious as to how street-level bureaucrats made sense of managerial demands about work orientation and activation of users with long-term health problems. This qualitative and interpretive approach makes sense in the context of the street-level bureaucracy literature and its emphasis on exploring the determinants of gaps between policy and practice. By focusing on how frontline workers use their practical experience to make sense of policy demands and carve out their own interpretations of policy in a practical context, we can gain new insights into how such gaps emerge.

Data were collected at two local NAV-offices in the period between October 2012 and February 2013. Access to the two offices was gained through the county NAV management in two different counties. They were conceived as relatively well-functioning offices, and any findings are thus unlikely to be explained by reference to particular local organizational troubles for instance.

In collaboration with a research assistant, Heidi Moen Gjersøe, 25 interviews were conducted with street-level bureaucrats (including the managers of the two relevant departments). Most of these were responsible for clients receiving the work assessment allowance mentioned above. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. We applied a loosely structured

interview guide and strived for an open, informal atmosphere where we signalled that we wanted to understand how the informants worked and why they did things the way they said. We were in particular addressing the informants' involvement with work ability assessments and the development of individual action plans, thus including questions of how activation requirements are defined, imposed and monitored in practice. Although the offices were located in different counties, different types of municipalities (one urban, one semi-rural) and were differently sized, the patterns that emerged were quite similar, thus indicating that they are not unusual.

Thematically, the interviews were structured around two main issues: work ability assessments and the development of individual action plans, including how these plans are being followed up. By using these very specific work methods as starting points the informants were able to speak concretely about their work and how they solved everyday tasks. This also became a starting point for more general reflections on the kinds of knowledge and competences they needed in their work, as well as the practical and ethical tensions they experienced in everyday work situations. The interviews were taped and later transcribed and uploaded into a qualitative data computer software package (Nvivo10) that was used to assist analysis. I read through all the interviews at least twice and coded them using thematic codes that emerged through close reading. Later the parts coded in ways particularly relevant to this article were reread in more detail, and typical themes and patterns made note of. Relevant codes included: activity plans (subnodes: targets, how to do, limits to requirements, follow up, measures), user involvement, the important dialogue, knowledge and competence, discretion and disagreements.

The empirical analysis is divided in two parts, following Evetts' (2009) distinction between organizational and occupational professionalism. In the first I analyze attempts to professionalize NAV's activation efforts from the top, drawing on information about work tools and competence from policy documents as well as understandings of these tools gained through fieldwork. The second part brings in a stronger bottom-up perspective at competence looking at how the interview data contain formulations of an occupational professionalism based in relational competence.

Professionalism as governance – organizational professionalism

The entire NAV-reform can be read as an attempt to professionalize efforts to move people from social security schemes and into the labour market, and it was launched (among other

things) as a competence reform. The reform further aimed to make users' encounters with the welfare services easier, to better adapt services to their needs and to coordinate all services and expertise relevant to help people into work. Two problems were thus addressed: the fact that too many working age individuals relied on welfare benefits instead of being employed and the lack of coordination between the different agencies that should be mobilised into achieving a more work focused welfare policy (Andreassen and Fossetøl 2011).

The development of shared competence and shared culture in the NAV-offices is emphasised in several policy documents (St. prp. nr 46 (2004-2005): 93, St. meld. nr 9 (2006-2007): 82). The construction of a shared professional system of competences and knowledge is a prime mechanism both for the establishment of legitimacy and trust in professional practitioners, but also for governance, argues Fournier (1999). It is through the shared code of conduct which professional knowledge represents, that the room for discretion is delineated. This was a particularly pertinent point for the new NAV organisation, where staff came from different agencies with divergent traditions for work orientated services, and continues to be stressed in more recent evaluations (Ekspergruppen 2015).

In this paper I am interested in the types of competence that are called for in establishing more work- and activation focused welfare services. As noted in the introduction there is no generally accepted and scientifically grounded knowledge base for the practice of activation (however, see Malmberg-Heimoen et al. 2015). In policy documents the needs for competence in NAV is very broadly defined. One of the more detailed discussions of required NAV competence I have found in welfare policy documents is from the white paper on welfare policies launched in 2006 (about the same time as the NAV-reform was put in motion). The competence requirements made on staff in the new organisation are extensive and include (St. meld. nr 9 (2006-2007): 82-3):

- "Basic competence" to provide shared understanding of aims, visions and values.
- User involvement competence, including skills in conducting dialogues with the users and skills in mobilising the clients own experience and competence.
- Competence about supervisory roles and methods for individual follow-up. It is also acknowledged that the emphasis on individual adaptation implies "raised demands for professional use of discretion and personal competence (attitudes and skills)" (ibid. 82)

- As it is a crucial task for the NAV advisors to assess clients' work ability, they also need "work and welfare specific competence" (ibid. 83), including knowledge of local and regional labour markets, and skills to motivate and assist clients to find work.
- Finally they need legal competence and ICT competence, as well as multicultural sensitivity.

Similar perspectives prevail in later policy documents, such as a white paper on education in welfare- and health professions which calls for "stronger labour market focus" and "supervision competence" in social work education (Meld. St. nr 13 (2011-2012): 83). In a very recent evaluation competence to perform work ability assessments is strongly emphasised, in tandem with recommendations to shift emphasis from the quality of written work ability assessments to the quality of the meetings with the users (Ekspertgruppen 2015: 14-15).

In short, necessary competence is to a large extent defined in terms of shared aims and values, procedures and people-processing skills, but also contains more specific knowledge such as knowledge about the labour market, law and ICT. Further, if we look at how the reform is implemented in practice the general emphasis on creating shared ways of thinking about aims and procedures is accompanied with the introduction of more standardized tools to manage people-processing. Two such very specific tools are work ability assessments and individual action plans. Both of these tools are typical to the governance of activation programmes in several countries, although they may work somewhat differently in different types of welfare state contexts (Gjersøe 2016).

A work ability assessment (*arbeidsevnevurdering*, AEV) is a systematic procedure to assess users' resources and barriers and the type of assistance s/he will need to find work. An AEV is required when there is reason to believe that a user has reduced work ability and is a precondition for being granted AAP and certain other benefits. From the perspective of the authorities it is a tool to provide information and categorize claimants in order to determine how service- and benefits resources should be distributed, and for the new AAP claimant it is a first step in the process of defining the kinds of active measures s/he should take part in. The AEV consists of two parts. First the claimant has to fill in a self-assessment form. In the next step this is used as a starting point in an interview with a NAV advisor, who in the end writes an AEV in NAVs computerised information system Arena. The assessment is written in a standardised form with headlines such as work experience, education/skills, hobbies, personal

opportunities and challenges, social and material conditions and health. Under each headline resources and barriers are outlined, and an assessment of the implications of these for future actions and work prospects is given. This provides a structured method for evaluating the needs and prospects of new users, and is thus a method to manage the discretion of street-level bureaucrats. But it also means that the imprecise art of making distinctions between those with or without needs for activation, those with and without a future in the labour market, is construed as a structured method that can be learned, a domain of professionalised expertise.

Every AAP-client has a right to an individual action plan (*aktivitetsplan*), and each NAV-office is evaluated on the proportion of clients who have such a plan. This plan, ideally, defines the general activity requirements in an individualised way, tailored to the resources and needs of each client. An activity plan will specify the kind of target the user aims for (for example to find work within a particular field), and appropriate measures to reach this target (such as work practice, courses or regular education, as well as medical treatment). A final purpose of the plan is to be a tool for user involvement; the plan should be worked out in dialogue with the client.

Common to both these tools is that they constitute different types of governance tools depending on whether we view them as tools for the governance of street-level bureaucrats or for the governance of clients. With respect to the former they are tools of hierarchical governance; the activation workers are required to follow specific steps and procedures in their work. The methodologies of AEVs and activity plans work to limit their space of discretion by means of rules and procedures. In relation to the clients, these tools encourage self-governance. They require clients to reflect on what they are able to achieve in the labour market, on the kinds of barriers they need to overcome and the steps they can make in order to improve themselves and increase their own employability. This is reminiscent of Foucault's notion of "confessional technologies", that has been applied to understand the modern spread of counselling techniques based in ideas that people can gain control over their lives through working on themselves and create knowledge of him/herself as a basis for improvement (Fejes 2008, Nguyen 2013). Born and Jensen (2010) call this kind of dialogue-based activation a "new dispositif", meaning that contemporary welfare policies require users to constitute themselves as creative and self-reflexive subjects in dialogue with the street-level bureaucrats. This requires specific skills from the users, but also works to constitute the competence needs of NAV's street-level bureaucrats in particular ways. Emphasis is on the

encounter between client and counsellor, their dialogue and relation; in short, on the NAV-workers ability to generate genuine accounts of work ability and -aspirations as well as self-conceptions that incorporate realistic trajectories for the clients into the labour market.

Competence at the street-level – occupational professionalism

Two characteristics of professional work are that it is knowledge based and involves a significant amount of discretion. Activation workers have considerable space for discretion in their work, but the knowledge base on which these discretionary decisions are made is diffuse and heterogeneous. In this section I will look more closely on the discourse of the street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) themselves. How do they speak about the competence they have and need in their work?

The short answer is that street-level bureaucrats talk about what they do and what their competence is in terms of procedures and people-handling skills – in fact, much in the same terms as in the policy documents discussed above. Fundamentally, the street-level bureaucrats' job is to see the potentials of their clients, assessing their skills and challenges and then being able to refer them to measures that can open up new opportunities in the labour market.

This was quite clear when we in the interviews were curious about how they worked with individual activity plans, in particular how they worked to formulate the targets and measures that make up these plans. Two themes that often emerged in the responses were motivational skills and dialogue. Users must be made to talk, and they must be enabled to seeing possibilities. This parallels other studies which also show how emotional competences are framed as professional resources (Virkki 2008, Hochschild 1983). Drawing up activity plans is primarily done on the basis of meetings and conversations. One case officer describes the starting point of these conversations like this:

SLB: Many of them are perhaps moving away from the work they have had. Some are ill from a job they have and need a longer sick leave than the 52 weeks of paid sick leave. But some are going into a completely new type of work. They have no job or cannot continue in the job they have had previously. Perhaps they had too much heavy lifting – those with muscle and skeleton pains. Others had too much stress in the job and cannot handle it mentally. And this is where you are never fully trained. You can read as many laws and rules as you like. The users may have low motivation, little faith in themselves. Some are clear – they want to do this and that. But for others

everything feels useless. Perhaps they have gone for years and see no solutions to anything, they do not think they can get out again. Are very focused on their own illness. Breaking through something like this can be hard. But it is something about using the opportunities that we have.

Ideally the plans shall be designed with activities and sub-targets that are pointing in the direction of a main target, for example a specific kind of work. In practice it seems that the main target often is phrased in very general terms, such as “return to work”. The emphasis in the meetings and conversations is on the specific activities – treatments – clients are to be enrolled in. Sometimes the clients have clear ideas about appropriate activities. At other times the case officers must provide information about the range of available activities. Several meetings may be required in order for the client to orientate herself in and reach decisions on what is relevant for her.

SLB: ...well, they want some kind of activity, for just going to medical treatment, well, they get a bit sheltered from things. Just having colleagues, meeting someone on a regular basis, it seems like that is something many are missing. So that is a motivation on its own, I think, to start something. Then you must grab that, ok, what could have been possible. And some do not have, in a way, any clear work aspirations. Then we have work counselling, places we can refer them to (...) Or if they are interested in computers or something like that, we could send them to an IT course, could that be something, like making suggestions, cause I understand that it cannot be so easy in a way to know what possibilities one has.(...) So it is my job then, to look for what could be relevant and discuss it up against each other

There has to be agreement on the activities that are put into the plan. This is emphasized by nearly all the informants, and it is also reflected in the plans’ quasi-contractual style where both client and case officer must sign a plan for it to be valid. Much of the case officers’ time and skills are directed into this construction of consensus. It is about getting access to people’s thoughts, but also about making them think in terms of work aims and activation measures. In Born and Jensen’s terms: “The IAP dialogue creates the individual as a responsible self-observer, who acts upon him/herself; the individual is thus allocated autonomy together with new rights and obligations” (2010:330). How do you reach agreement on what activities that are going into the plan, we asked this informant:

SLB: We need to talk together. I often send people home with a little bit of homework. Not too much, but a couple of things. Ask them to think about different possibilities and then come back shortly. Give them a time limit to do some research. Most people have some ideas. Sometimes you can take hobbies as a starting point to see if there are any possibilities of finding work within that. Not everyone are certain about what they are going to do. Very many are uncertain.

I: So you need to go a bit back and forth?

SLB: Yes. Discuss. But then the problem is to find time for this with everyone. But the worst is those who do not have one single thought. That is not easy. Not everyone comes up with something either.

I: What do you do then?

SLB: We have collaborative partners who can assist. The work supervision office. The employment training providers have clarification courses. They are not only clarifying work ability, but also work goals. So you can order a closer follow-up programme to find work goals.

This informant mentions the option of referring clients to active measures aimed at specifying work aims and further actions. In other words, the construction of plans has become a work orientated activity in itself, managed by specific expertise. Some officers have also themselves been trained in using structured mapping tools with names such as “structured career interview” or “work interest explorer” in the meetings they have with the clients. But in the main informants speak about how they themselves work strategically to motivate clients through communication. They talk about the importance of establishing trust over time, about helping people to reflect on what their dreams are, perhaps using hobbies as a starting point to locate interests and competence in the clients, but also sometimes pushing people into activities they are less motivated for in the hope that it will stimulate their motivation to do more.

There are many parallels in how NAV officers talk about their work with clients in terms of dialogue, motivation and constructing a plan that is the client’s “own plan” and the discourse of professional (life) coaching (as well as other confessional technologies cf. Fejes 2008, Nguyen 2013). In the website of the International Coach Federation for example, coaching is described in terms of “setting goals, creating outcomes and managing personal change” and honouring “the client as the expert in his or her life and work”, while core competencies are listed as co-creating a relationship, communicating effectively and facilitating learning and

results.¹ NAV staff lack (thankfully) the glossy eloquence and corporate veneer of professional coaches, but we can recognize the importance placed on finding the resources and the answers within the client herself, facilitating processes through communication and engaging the client in identifying actions that will make goals attainable. There is a difference however. Professional coaches are hired by, often corporate and fairly successful, clients. NAV's clients depend on NAV for their income. They cannot set their own goals freely, but must do so in ways that are reconcilable with the work and activity targets that their case workers are set to administer. The relation is hierarchical, but the methods are dialogic and self-governmental. We were thus particularly interested in disagreements and asked questions about the types of disagreements which could arise and how they were resolved. The point stressed by many informants is to start processes where the client reaches a realistic plan through transforming their own aspirations.

I: Do you and the user always agree at first?

SLB: There isn't that much disagreement with me, but there has been a lot in the office. For example that someone wants to become a rosen method bodywork therapist, that we think is not so easy to make a living from, starting your own therapy practice. I have had some who have ideas about starting businesses that I didn't think were entirely realistic, but then I have asked them to contact the local business council and get help to make a business plan and asked them to consider if this is something. And it has always solved itself by them understanding that this is not workable.

The obviously asymmetric power relations outlined above thus co-exist with an insistence on the primacy of the user's voice. User orientation has become a guiding principle in nearly all Norwegian public institutions in the 2000s, and the idea that the design and delivery of services should be adapted to users' needs, has been turned into a key slogan for subsequent governments' efforts to reform public sector – including the NAV-reform (Syltevik 2013). This is also reflected in how informants talked about activity plans, in particular with respect to the ideas about quality in such plans. We asked, in an open manner, all the informants who worked with activity plans what, in their mind, constitutes a good activity plan. Nearly all answers revolved around the same theme; it has to be the user's own plan.

I: But what do you think is a good plan?

¹ <http://www.coachfederation.org> (last accessed 13.02.2015)

SLB: That must obviously be the plan where the user is fully involved. Where the person to a large extent has taken part in shaping it. That must be the main rule.

The emphasis on user involvement further stresses the importance of being able to create consensus through generating processes from within the client themselves. The trick, as this informant recounts it, is to engage people in dialogic processes that create new opportunities within themselves.

SLB: What I think is most exciting about that is the persons who have been in a job for a long time and believe they can do only that. And then you start playing a bit of ball with them and find out that that you have this and this competence, you could have worked with this and that. Oh, really, can I do that, they say then.

Activation work takes place in an environment over which the SLBs have limited control and knowledge. The effects of specific activation measures tend to be undocumented and even if they were documented would still be uncertain for a specific client. The real employability of a person, often with diffuse health problems, is also uncertain and dependent on unknown factors beyond the qualifications they succeed in obtaining through activation (e.g. discrimination of people with health problems or a history of receiving disability benefits).

Some informants clearly express the uncertain character of their work. One cannot on a first encounter with a client construe the perfect plan for bringing this person into work. Rather, this is a type of work that requires long term perspectives and a focus on process. Solutions need to be reached at over time.

SLB: It is not exactly a set answer, I can see that, that we are doing in a way many specific assessments and trying to land it on a basis on variables which are a little variable. But it is actually like this. An that is why it is often like this. I can see from the plans that is often is like this, we have to try out things. We cannot with 100 per cent certainly say what is recommendable and not, we just need to try with a basis in some overall goals.

Interviewer: Yes, what kinds of goals?

SLB: I'm thinking that if we in a way are trying to, that a person shall become healthy and return to work, if we say that is the goal. But what way should this person go? And what is sensible with respect to that? What is the right way, the right speed, how

do you build stone upon stone. So that you are prepared and not the opposite. This is difficult. There are so many factors that play a part.

In this environment, a focus on the results of activation in the shape of return-to-work rates would constitute a measure for good work relying on variables over which the SLBs feel they have very limited control. Instead they have found other dimensions against which to assess the quality and meaning of what they do. It is the ability to mobilise the clients themselves in their own activation, to put the user in the centre, that seems to have become the key yardstick when the street-level bureaucrats assess their own skills and competences.

So far, I have argued that the key competence of activation workers is conceived in terms of communication, motivation and relational skills. But they also talk about the competence they miss. In order to supervise clients in making their own plans and to assess their employability, activation workers need to know about relevant work orientated measures and schemes, and about the needs and requirements of the labour market.

Interviewer: This must require quite a bit of knowledge about the labour market and the possibilities that exist?

SLB: Yes. And this I am not so certain on. This is something I think we should be better trained in. Of course, you can sit down and orientate yourself, but where to begin? It is very extensive. It is changing all the time. (...) But yes, it does require a lot of knowledge about the labour market. I think we should have had more knowledge on that.

I: The labour market, do you think about knowledge about different sectors, unemployment?

SLB: One thing is to do a quick search on nav.no [a database with vacant jobs] to see how many vacant positions there are as a waiter or as a home care assistant for example. Another thing is what jobs you can get with what education. We have this system in Arena where you can click on different types of jobs. I have used that. Pre school teachers do not need to work in a kindergarten although that is the first you think about. But there are other areas where you are completely green. What jobs can someone who has studied physics get?

While many SLBs appear confident in their abilities to meet clients, many of the informants lament limited knowledge with respect to knowledge about the labour market and the labour

market prospects clients with different skills and educations actually have. Notwithstanding access to various web-based resources, the inherently complex and uncertain nature of the labour market makes it challenging to provide concrete advice and guidance – which again sustains the emphasis on giving primacy to the client’s voice and to find a sense of mastery in relational competence.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to go beyond the observation that there is no generally accepted knowledge base for activation work (van Berkel et al 2010), and instead looked at how this apparent competence void is being filled in the context of street-level activation work. A key finding is that professional competence in activation work is construed as knowledge about how to work with people, more than what to do with them. Rather than being orientated towards labour market expertise there is a tendency to psychologize ideas of a professional activation competence.

This apparently inward-looking tendency may appear paradoxical considering the emphasis in activation policy on active, labour market orientated measures and return to work rates. One popular explanation is simply that the NAV-workers do not share these work aims, that they do not think in the appropriate manner for a work orientated delivery of welfare policy. However, there is little, neither in my data nor in representative survey data (Terum, Tufte and Jessen 2012) which substantiates such a claim of value divergence. Instead the source of the paradox is more likely to be found in tensions within policy and the larger street-level organization (Brodkin 2013). The policy emphasis on user orientation and individual action plans are meant to provide “tailor made” measures for bringing the long-term sick into work. But this kind of individualised measures also works to locate the answers to the how-to-activate-question within the user. Confessional techniques become the *modus operandi* of activation work, encouraging the self-governance of users guided by the relationally skilled NAV workers. In this sense, SLBs do not subvert but endorse policy aims – although perhaps with unintended effects. Following Lipsky (1980), the psychologization of activation work can be understood also as a coping strategy; a way of finding meaning and mastery in a line of work where SLBs have limited influence over employers’ hiring decisions and where efforts often do not lead to the intended outcomes (users returning to work) for reasons beyond the SLBs control.

An alternative strategy for competence building in NAV could have been to look outward to the labour market rather than inward to the relations and dialogue between NAV's users and frontline staff. This is also an oft repeated claim from NAV staff, that they miss "labour market competence". Such competence enhancement could for example take place in developing practical labour market knowledge through concrete relationships between frontline workers and work places (e.g. stemming from recruiting and monitoring work placement positions). Currently this is difficult to achieve since NAV, in line with dominant principles of public sector governance over the past decades, to a large extent has outsourced the responsibility for this kind of interactions to private (commercial and non-profit) service producers. It is these external agencies which actually deliver the active measures that individual action plans are made up of.

The article contributes to a fairly limited literature on the implementation of activation policy in Europe. Although it is based on data from a small sample of Norwegian NAV offices, the types of policies and tools that are being implemented in my field sites resemble those found throughout Western European welfare states. This is not to say that policies will be implemented in a similar ways in other types of institutional contexts. On the contrary, it may be that the more coercive aspects of activation policy is mellowed into a kind of normatively guided coaching in the Norwegian case because principles of user orientation have such a strong position. More comparative approaches to the implementation of activation tools in different institutional contexts would be a fruitful avenue for further research.

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