

International Social Security Review

Themed issue: Street-level bureaucracy in welfare-to-work in Europe

- ▶ Introduction: Frontline delivery of welfare-to-work in different European contexts
 - ▶ A knowledge hierarchy in labour and welfare services? Evidence-based and practice-based knowledge in frontline service innovation
 - ▶ Co-production and social innovation in street-level employability services: Lessons from services with lone parents in Scotland
 - ▶ Activating the most disadvantaged youth in Switzerland: Administratively too risky, politically too costly?
 - ▶ Organizational governance of activation policy: Transparency as an organizational ideal in a Swedish welfare agency
 - ▶ Does individualized employment support deliver what is promised? Findings from three European cities
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Guest editors: Rik van Berkel, Flemming Larsen and Dorte Caswell

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Introduction: Frontline delivery of welfare-to-work in different European contexts

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Abstract This themed issue contributes to European research on the role of front-line work in the implementation of welfare-to-work policies. A number of factors underline the relevance of such study. First, the focus on activating and disciplining the unemployed seen in many countries may on the surface look similar. However, a closer look at these policies and how they unfold in different contexts reveals many and interesting differences. While all contain a certain level of disciplining and coercive elements, they also to a varying degree contain elements that focus on the upgrading of skills, building human capital and providing other types of support in promoting labour-market participation. In turn, these policies contain both people processing and people changing technologies that are used for different aspects of policy delivery. In addition, policy developments have gradually expanded the client group of these policies, including more hard-to-place unemployed, thus making the client group more heterogeneous. Finally, we have seen a strong political belief in the positive effects of using punitive sanctions. Research supports this belief when it comes to clients with high employability and limited problems besides

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The articles that comprise this themed issue were first presented as papers at the 15th Annual ESPAnet Conference (Panel on Linking “Doing Policy” and “Policy Delivery”: Frontline delivery of welfare-to-work policies in Europe), Lisbon, Portugal from 14–16 September 2017.

unemployment, but the knowledge-base is rather shaky when it comes to the hard-to-place clients with substantial problems. Using punitive sanctions or other disciplining or coercive measures in frontline work has caused controversy and resistance. In order to qualify our understanding of welfare-to-work policies, we need to take a step closer to where these policies are translated into reality for the target group.

Keywords return to work, social security administration, social policy, Europe

Introduction

The idea for a themed issue on street-level bureaucracy in welfare-to-work policies came after the guest editors initiated and realized a stream at the ESPAnet conference in September 2017 in Lisbon, Portugal. The ESPAnet stream followed a recently published volume, *Frontline delivery of welfare-to-work policies in Europe* (van Berkel, et al., 2017). We were happily taken aback by the high level of interest from researchers from all over the world to participate in this stream. We received over 25 abstracts and selected 14 papers for presentation in four well-attended sessions that ran over two days. The overall high quality of the papers presented at the conference made the idea of proceeding with an issue containing research from scholars not included in the book the obvious next step – and the invitation from *International Social Security Review* to guest edit a themed issue based on the papers was therefore warmly welcomed. The growing interest in street-level bureaucracy research in recent years has been noticeable and substantial. Not only for the said ESPAnet conference, but also prior to this at the International Conference on Public Policy (Grenoble, France in 2013; Milan, Italy in 2015; and Singapore in 2017) and at the 2015 and 2017 *Street-level Bureaucracy Research Conferences* at Aalborg University in Copenhagen, Denmark.

While studies on the role of front-line work in the implementation of welfare-to-work policies have been conducted in Australia and the United States since the 1990s, European interest in this type of study started in the first decade of this millennium. To contribute to European research in this field is an important aim for the guest editors of this issue. Why, then, is it relevant to study the frontline work that takes place in the implementation of activation and welfare-to-work policies?

First of all, the strong and not-so-new policy current focusing on activating and disciplining unemployed workers that has swept across most of the Western world

may on the surface look similar. However, when we take a closer look at these policies, and how they unfold in different contexts, we find many and interesting differences. While these welfare-to-work policies all contain a certain level of disciplining and coercive elements, they also to a varying degree contain elements that focus on the upgrading of skills, building human capital and providing other types of support to promote labour-market participation. These opposing elements co-exist in the welfare-to-work policies and give room for variation in policy delivery at the frontline. Second, these policies contain both people processing and people changing technologies (Hasenfeld, 2010) that are used for different aspects of policy delivery. In addition, we have seen policy developments that have gradually expanded the client group of these policies, including the more hard-to-place unemployed, thus making the client group more heterogeneous. This has, in turn, made the selection of technologies and measures that frontline workers use for these clients more complicated. Finally, yet importantly, we have seen a strong political belief in the positive effects of using punitive sanctions. Research supports this belief when it comes to clients with high employability and limited problems besides unemployment, but the knowledge base is rather shaky when it comes to the hard-to-place clients with substantial problems. Using punitive sanctions or other disciplining or coercive measures in frontline work has caused controversy and resistance. To qualify our understanding of welfare-to-work policies, it is not sufficient to understand policy on paper. Instead, we need to take a step closer to where these policies are translated into reality for the target group. This process of translation should be understood not as an implementation failure, but rather as structured patterns that link to a myriad of contextual factors that play decisive roles in frontline work and thus for the clients in question.

Policy implementation is therefore to be considered as part of the policy-making process where street level bureaucrats acquire a role as policy-makers (Lipsky, 2010). Studies of formal policies can only provide a partial understanding of what policy looks like in practice and what policy does for the citizens for whom it is directed. Brodtkin (2017) has called this the “missing middle” of policy analysis. Thus street-level bureaucrats are not only “agents of the state” acting in the role of policy implementers – they are also mediators of policies and politics. What street-level bureaucrats do in their everyday work on the frontlines of the welfare state depends on much more than their individual preferences and characteristics. Brodtkin (1997) argues: “street-level bureaucrat do not do what they want, they do what they can” (p. 24). Discretion is inevitable in street-level work and street-level bureaucrats do have agency. One way to conceptualize this is that they have a certain “wiggle room” (Erickson, 2001). However, the room for discretionary decision-making is structured by context. We argue that an analytical model pointing out the following contextual elements will provide a

conceptual framework for what kinds of contexts should be taken into consideration in order to better understand policy as it is realized on the frontline (Figure 1).

There is, in other words, a growing need for research that studies how frontline practices in activation are structured and shaped by the policy, governance, organizational and occupational contexts in which frontline workers do their work. Such type of knowledge is of immense importance to understand how frontline workers in street-level organizations deliver activation policies and services, in terms of the practical nature and content of activation services and processes. Besides the importance of gaining new knowledge on the treatment, involvement and participation of clients in activation processes, this also will enhance understanding of how frontline practices affect the intended and unintended outcomes of activation policies. The nature of this research needs to be empirically grounded and preferably comparative – where both internationally and nationally comparative studies may be very fruitful. The articles in this issue report on this type of research. As such they constitute an important contribution to the field; to date, there has been limited attention given to a comparative perspective in this research area. Fortunately, researchers in Europe and beyond who are interested in street-level bureaucracy research increasingly manage to connect with one another, as illustrated by our recent book (van Berkel et al., 2017), as well as the ESPAnet session from which this issue stems and our recurrent street-level bureaucracy conferences in Copenhagen. These types of collaboration are promising in terms of opening possibilities to develop more comparative analyses of street-level bureaucracy across contexts. Developing new empirical research with robust comparative research designs and

Figure 1. *A contextualized approach of activation frontline work: An analytical model*



Source: Author.

with high context sensitivity is very challenging, costly and time consuming. We hope to be able to accomplish this goal in time. One of the challenges for undertaking comparative studies is methodological. Many studies have approached the study of street-level bureaucracy from a qualitative or ethnographic position, often through case studies of different kinds. While these research designs have their limits in terms of empirical generalization and causality, they offer rich insights into the everyday practice of street-level work. Other studies have utilized administrative registers and different types of multi-level analysis. Studying street-level bureaucracy from a distance does however pose a danger to miss some of the finer grained negotiations, decisions or rationales that take place on the frontline. As argued recently by Zarka (2017) there are many good reasons for approaching this field of study with at least a degree of ethnographic sensitivity.

A comparative perspective can be fruitful even without an all-encompassing and methodologically ambitious starting point. One kind of comparative perspective is comparison between different national contexts. Looking across national contexts often permits to compare specific aspects of a policy, such as the organization of policy delivery, how the resources of frontline staff differ in terms of their qualifications, how much time frontline staff have for clients, or how different governance or control structures influence policy delivery at the frontline. The comparative perspective allows us to see differences and similarities, as well as to question elements that may be taken for granted in one national context, but where comparative research shows us how things may be less self-evident from an international point of view. Comparison sometimes takes a point of departure in categorizing, for instance, policy content (enabling or coercive) or assumptions about welfare state models. We argue that while these are obviously relevant factors to include in comparative analyses, they are not sufficient in terms of understanding the differences in welfare-to-work policy in practice. Comparative studies are however not limited to national comparisons, but can also be comparisons over time through longitudinal studies or comparisons of specific organizational models or across other types of contexts. In this issue we draw together five different articles all addressing welfare-to-work policy delivery in different European countries. As such, the point of this issue is essentially comparative. The contributions are not merely comparing across national contexts. Rather, a comparative perspective is applied in a variety of ways in the different contributions and can be read across the set of articles. One issue that surfaces across the articles is how administrative procedures and resources influence policy delivery. This contributes to further our understanding of how different contexts influence frontline work and thus plays an important role in the reality of policy delivery. Another issue is how the challenges to realizing successful welfare-to-work policies are sometimes overcome by innovative approaches that point towards a change in epistemic perspectives. Finally, yet

importantly, the challenged – but conceivably changing – role of the client in policy delivery is addressed across the contributions.

The set of articles

The five articles that comprise this issue contribute to the growing comparative literature on frontline work in welfare-to-work policies. The first article by Eric Breit, Knut Fossetøl and Eirin Pedersen, “A knowledge hierarchy in labour and welfare services? Evidence-based and practice-based knowledge in frontline service innovation”, focuses on recent developments in the Norwegian context of welfare-to-work. The article draws on a comparative case study of two local innovation projects conducted by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in a four-year service innovation programme. The authors argue that although policy-makers and scholars have directed increasing attention towards collaborative innovation and knowledge development between frontline agencies and workers and other stakeholders such as citizens and researchers, empirical research has not focused on the (varying) assessment of collaborators regarding what knowledge would be “appropriate” to develop. Although the projects involved responded to the same call, they developed two very distinct types of knowledge; one dealt with practice-based knowledge and the other with evidence-based knowledge. The authors show that whereas the former knowledge type was contested and difficult to transform into practice, the latter involved few (if any) challenges and was implemented on a relatively large scale. These two projects point to the possible existence of a hierarchy of knowledge in labour and welfare services, where evidence-based forms of knowledge and methods are regarded as more legitimate and appropriate than forms of knowledge placed “lower” in the hierarchy. In the article, the reasons for and implications of this apparent hierarchy of knowledge for frontline work in labour and welfare services are discussed. The discussion of what kind of knowledge is relevant for developing welfare-to-work policy and practices is highly relevant in a broader comparative perspective.

In the second article, by Colin Lindsay, Sarah Pearson, Elaine Batty, Anne Marie Cullen and Will Eadson, “Co-production and social innovation in street-level employability services: Lessons from services with lone parents in Scotland”, the argument is made that alternative governance approaches such as co-production and social innovation have the potential to be more successful than the typical United Kingdom approach. Compared to other European welfare-to-work contexts, the United Kingdom represents an exemplar liberal welfare state that has been characterized as in the vanguard of “work-first” activation – deploying high levels of compulsion and standardized employability services that seek to move people from welfare to work as quickly as possible. However, despite the

extension of welfare conditionality to excluded groups such as lone parents, government-led, work-first employability programmes have often proved ineffective at assisting the most vulnerable to escape poverty or even to just progress into the labour market. This is the starting point for exploring an alternative approach to co-production. The authors draw on a large-scale qualitative study, with 90 interviews with lone parents and more than 100 interviews with delivery stakeholders and street-level workers. The study focused on local services targeting lone parents led by third sector–public sector partnerships in five localities in Scotland, and identified factors associated with positive social and employability outcomes. The research identifies a positive relation between programme governance and management that are defined by co-governance and collaborative partnership-working on the one hand and the co-production of street-level services that deliver benefits in terms of social innovation and employability on the other. The article concludes by identifying potential lessons for the governance and delivery of future services targeting vulnerable groups. In an international context where welfare-to-work has swept across many countries and where the effectiveness of this policy in terms of promoting the labour-market inclusion of the hard-to-place unemployed has been disappointing, the focus on innovation and co-production as a constructive way forward is highly relevant.

The third article, “Activating the most-disadvantaged youth in Switzerland: Administratively too risky, politically too costly?” by Delia Pisoni, is based upon a case study of a vocational education and training programme for disadvantaged youth in one Swiss canton. Pisoni finds that the programme did not reach the most-disadvantaged groups as intended. Instead, the findings show creaming practices as a coping strategy that enable frontline workers to satisfy strict assessment criteria. The author finds that for the majority of the organizations studied, access to public financing is vital, which makes reaching out to the most-disadvantaged target group youth too risky. The greater uncertainty of attaining the required success rate when working with the most disadvantaged youth risks undermining and even collapsing the programme’s broad political support and thus might be seen as politically too costly. Instead, by focusing on the least-disadvantaged youth the probability of attaining the required success rate within the strict timeframe is increased. The logic behind this is mostly driven by a political and administrative logic of ensuring the programme’s success to maintain legitimacy and funding for future similar programmes. The article illustrates well how the above-mentioned policy, governance and organizational contexts can frame frontline practices, thus underlining the need for researchers to be aware of these.

The fourth article, “Organizational governance of activation policy: Transparency as an organizational ideal in a Swedish welfare agency” by Katarina Hollertz, Kerstin

Jacobsson and Ida Seing, investigates how the ideal of transparency is negotiated and enacted in the everyday actions of a welfare bureaucracy; namely, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan* – SSIA). Transparency is often used as a main argument for the governance logic of audit in a hierarchical manner. However, the article clearly demonstrates that transparency does not only relate to hierarchies in bureaucracies, but that the ideal of transparency is also negotiated more horizontally in the organization. Furthermore, the authors show how the ideal of transparency is enacted in the everyday work of the SSIA. The analysis shows how this transparency ideal comes to play a central role in the alignment of frontline staff with the normative regime of the agency. As an internalized ideal, transparency becomes a self-evident part of organizational life and, thus, of the everyday work of the caseworkers. However, the analysis further demonstrates how transparency is much less salient in relation to clients and the outside world. It is primarily a central part of internal organizational life. Although based upon a single case-study in a state-run agency, the article challenges some of the typical assumptions of how such a governance logic of vertical transparency frames frontline work, by showing that frontline workers use this more horizontally, without resistance and even with compliance. This acts to remind the field of research on street-level policy delivery of the need for caution when analysing how contexts interrelate with frontline practices, as well as of the need to be aware of organizational and, possibly, also occupational differences as important factors.

The fifth article, “Does individualized employment support deliver what is promised?: Findings from three European cities” by Deborah Rice, Vanesa Fuertes and Lara Monticelli, takes a closer look at governance conditions that facilitate or hamper the individualization of service delivery at street level. The article argues that since the inception of the European Employment Strategy in 1997, individualized employment support has been a key priority of the European Union and its Member States. Nevertheless, empirical research on the delivery of individualized services for the unemployed is still underdeveloped. The authors explore how local employment agencies in three European cities in Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom, tailor counselling and services to jobseekers’ individual needs. The research design of this article is comparative across three national contexts, which enables the authors to contribute to a theoretical endeavour to outline under which conditions an effective individualization of counselling and services can be expected in street-level practice. The article confirms the crucial importance of (national or local) governance arrangements for street-level individualization practices and thus for clients. The authors find that limited service budgets and underdeveloped organizational interfaces with social service providers tend to constrain the substantive individualization of services in practice, which works to the disadvantage of vulnerable jobseekers.

Individualized counselling is more widespread, at least for selected target groups. However, organizational capacities for offering individualized problem assessment and advice vary considerably across “worlds of individualization” in Europe.

We hope that this issue will show that to better understand policy as it is realized on the frontline, it is fruitful to apply a comparative and highly contextualised approach to welfare-to-work and its delivery. We welcome further comparative research in the years to come.

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A knowledge hierarchy in labour and welfare services? Evidence-based and practice-based knowledge in frontline service innovation

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Abstract Although policy-makers and scholars have directed increasing attention towards collaborative innovation and knowledge development between frontline agencies and workers and other stakeholders such as citizens and researchers, empirical research has not focused on the (varying) assessment of collaborators regarding what knowledge is “appropriate” to develop. In this article, we examine such knowledge assessments by drawing on a comparative case study of two local innovation projects conducted by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in a four-year service innovation programme. Although they responded to the same call, the projects involved development of two very distinct types of knowledge; one dealt with practice-based knowledge and the other with evidence-based knowledge. We show that whereas the former knowledge type was contested and difficult to transform into practice, the latter prompted few (if any) challenges and was implemented on a relatively large scale. These two projects point to the possible existence of a hierarchy of knowledge in labour and welfare services, where evidence-based forms of knowledge and methods are regarded as more legitimate and appropriate than forms of knowledge

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placed “lower” in the hierarchy. We discuss the reasons for and implications of this apparent hierarchy of knowledge for frontline labour and welfare services.

Keywords return to work, social security administration, social policy, research method, Norway

Introduction

At the beginning of 2013, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) initiated a four-year service knowledge development programme called “Practice and knowledge development in NAV offices” (henceforth PKD). NAV is responsible for the activation of vulnerable citizens, i.e. unemployed citizens with complex combinations of health, cognitive, mental and social challenges, and the PKD programme was to contribute to the development of services for this group of citizens. The services were to be developed through collaboration between four institutional actors: frontline workers, researchers, educational institutions, and users. The programme consisted of three locally developed research and development projects in various regions of Norway.

PKD can be understood as an attempt by the government to meet new demands for the provision of knowledge-based labour and welfare services, i.e. services based on systematically developed research-based knowledge, the experiential knowledge of frontline workers, and the needs and demands of citizens (Godfrey, 2001; Miles, 2000; Webb, 2001). To meet these demands, PKD involved the creation of an epistemic infrastructure around the NAV offices in which the frontline workers would participate in research and development (R&D) of new services together with researchers (and their universities) and citizens. This epistemic infrastructure is consonant with ideas of collaborative innovation that aim to bring together actors from different professional and institutional backgrounds to define common problems and develop joint solutions (Bommert, 2010; Entwistle and Martin, 2005; Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013, p. 826; Rashman, Withers and Hartley, 2009; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011).

Knowledge-based services are needed more broadly because the field of labour and welfare services in Norway is highly politicized and hence comprises a range of actors (e.g. public agencies, researchers, service providers, third sector organizations, and universities) with different conceptions regarding the type of knowledge on which the services should be based. The implications of evidence-based knowledge and practices, i.e. knowledge developed with systematic and rigorous methods and operationalized through intervention programmes

involving work manuals or routines, have been a crucial topic of discussion (Greener and Greve, 2013; Grol and Wensing, 2004; Pawson, 2006). Much of the interest in evidence seems to come from the healthcare sector, which has a much longer tradition of evidence-based practice than labour and welfare services, including social work (Nicolini et al., 2008).

Despite increased policy emphasis on knowledge development and innovation in frontline labour and welfare services, relatively little is known about how such activities take place in practice and how they impact frontline work. Ferlie et al. (2013, p. 192) argue that the nature of knowledge itself must be addressed to understand epistemic practices and boundaries. In a study in the healthcare services, Martin, Currie and Lockett (2011) found that those who commissioned research and the researchers had very different accounts of what was considered appropriate and good-quality research. Hence, we believe that there is a need for increased understanding of how different assessments of the “right” or “appropriate” knowledge for labour and welfare services for vulnerable citizens impact service innovation. On this basis, our research question in this article is the following: How do different notions of appropriate knowledge impact service innovation in labour and welfare services?

In the sections that follow, we elaborate on two projects in the PKD programme, one of which sought to develop practice-oriented knowledge and the other evidence-based knowledge. We show how the project aiming at the development of practice-oriented knowledge had relatively little legitimacy in NAV, did not lead to any significant changes in work practices in NAV, and caused considerable disappointment among the involved frontline workers because the new practices produced by the research were not converted into new work routines. Conversely, the project aiming at the development of evidence-based knowledge enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy in NAV, led to implementation of new occupational roles and work practices, and aroused relatively little resistance by frontline workers. We believe that these differences suggest the existence of a hierarchy of knowledge in labour and welfare services, where evidence-based forms of knowledge and methods are regarded as more legitimate and appropriate than forms of knowledge placed “lower” in the hierarchy. The article concludes with a discussion of the reasons for this hierarchy of knowledge and its implications for frontline labour and welfare services.

Knowledge and public service innovation

Two understandings of knowledge

Two broad types of knowledge legitimize professional services: practice-based knowledge and evidence-based knowledge. On the one hand, the concept of

practice-based (or experiential) knowledge focuses on knowledge that takes into account the complex and dynamic settings in which frontline services take place (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Orlikowski, 2002). Rejecting positivist epistemology for a more reflexive and practical epistemology, practice-based knowledge entails acknowledgement of frontline workers as subjects that experience and apply knowledge. Accordingly, its content may not mean the same to all involved. Furthermore, practice-based knowledge may often be developed in collaboration between researchers and practitioners and in connection with concrete development tasks (Lave and Wenger, 1991), for example through forms of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Such knowledge intersects “academic” and “practical” knowledge, or “knowing” and “doing”, and hence may lead professionals to obtain the competence needed to apply theoretical principles to unique situations. At least in Norway, practical-based knowledge seems to be the dominant form in the professional education of social workers (Hutchinson and Oltedal, 2017), who constitute the dominant professional group in frontline labour and welfare services.

On the other hand, the concept of evidence-based knowledge focuses broadly on the production of knowledge about the effects of specific interventions through meta-reviews or systematic reviews. Assessment of the strength of the evidence is a central feature in these reviews. Randomized and controlled trials (RCT) are typically placed at the top of the hierarchy, as a “gold standard” (level 1); followed by quasi-experimental studies (level 2); before-and-after comparisons (level 3); cross-sectional studies (level 4); process evaluation, formative studies and action research (level 5); qualitative case studies (level 6); descriptive guides and examples of good practice (level 7); and user opinion (level 8) (Pawson, 2006, pp. 49–50).

For frontline workers, evidence-based knowledge is manifested in work descriptions of interventions. These work descriptions may range from standardized manuals to a set of principles to be followed, and form the key instruments through which knowledge is converted into actual service practice. The central rationale for the manuals is that we need to improve the discretion of professionals and hence to simplify and systematize their work tasks with manuals or checklists. Some argue that professionals should use such manuals or checklists to structure their work because of the weaknesses inherent in human discretion (see Kirkebøen, 2008). Conversely, others talk about a “number and control group tyranny” and a “clash of cultures” that may threaten the autonomy of professionals (Hansen and Rieper, 2009; see also Mullen and Streiner, 2006; Nothdurfter and Lorenz, 2010).

The collaborative dynamics of public service innovation

The service development model in PKD emphasizes collaboration between various stakeholders. This is consonant with ideas of collaborative innovation that have

been growing in popularity across Europe in recent years (Bommert, 2010; Entwistle and Martin, 2005; Rashman, Withers and Hartley, 2009; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). The notion of collaboration is indicative of a broad shift in public policies away from New Public Management (NPM) and its emphasis on sectoral specialization and towards post-NPM or New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010) models involving networks and partnerships between public services and other actors (Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). The collaboration model rests on bringing together actors from different professional and institutional backgrounds to engage in the “constructive management of differences in order to define common problems and develop joint solutions” (Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013, p. 826).

This collaborative knowledge development model implies that knowledge in PKD is produced in social settings, through interaction between the various stakeholders involved, regardless of the type of knowledge produced (evidence-based or practice-based). The model poses new challenges to public administrations as control of knowledge-creation processes and responsibility for them is distributed among the collaborators. Rather than being in control of the knowledge development process, as in a more traditional bureaucratic or NPM model, collaboration requires “metagovernance” on behalf of public administrators (Jessop, 2011; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011), i.e. a balance between autonomous and bottom-up knowledge development and (top-down) control. According to Sørensen and Torfing (2011), the key tools for metagovernance at the disposal of public administrators are political, discursive and financial framing (i.e. defining objectives and narratives); institutional design (i.e. arenas for collaboration); network facilitation (i.e. process management); and network participation (i.e. exerting an impact on output from collaboration). The central challenge faced by public administrations as metagovernors is thus how to strike the right balance between regulation and autonomy. In the context of knowledge development, this calls for a suitable balance between accepting, promoting and implementing the knowledge that is developed and the expectations and requirements of public authorities regarding that knowledge. As we will show, assertions about evidence-based and practice-based knowledge may tap directly into this balance between regulation and autonomy.

Empirical context: The PKD programme

PKD was carried out in NAV in the period 2013–2016. It was financed and initiated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA) and based on experiences from a prior large-scale collaborative service innovation programme in the area of social services (the HUSK programme, 2006–2011, see Andreassen, 2015; Austin and Johannessen, 2015; Johannessen, Natland and Støkken, 2011). The

NAV was created by a reform initiated in 2006 that merged the state employment and national insurance agencies with municipal social services. The merger was operationalized through the establishment of local and frontline NAV offices in each municipality in Norway (2007–2010); these offices represented a partnership between the state (responsible for employment services) and each municipality (responsible for social services). However, over the years since the NAV reform, complete realization of the partnership model has proven to be challenging; for example, because it involves different professions/occupations (social work and activation workers), different office owners (the state and the municipalities), and different institutionalized practices and conceptions of appropriate knowledge at the NAV offices (Fossestøl et al., 2015). Also, the HUSK programme was criticized for focusing excessively on social services and thus not taking into account the employment- and activation-oriented services resulting from organizational changes in the NAV reform (Andreassen, 2015).

Furthermore, NAV has been criticized over the years for a lack of focus on employers' roles, especially as regards the needs of the most vulnerable users, who require extensive services. This criticism has in part spurred increased emphasis in NAV on labour-oriented services for vulnerable citizens, of which “work inclusion” or “place-then-train” services that focus on the active use of employers and paid work have been central (Berge and Falkum, 2013; Riesen, Morgan and Griffin, 2015). This has, for example, involved research on Supported Employment, which is an intervention within the “place-then-train” paradigm (Frøyland and Spjelkavik, 2014; Nøkleby, Blaasvær and Berg, 2017).

Hence, PKD can be understood as an attempt by the government to develop knowledge that first cuts across social and employment services and second prescribes how frontline workers can work more effectively with activation services and with employers. According to the initial assignment by the MLSA, the efforts were to involve “projects initiated on the basis of local needs” and “contribute to knowledge-based practices and new forms of collaboration between research, education, NAV and users” (MLSA, 2012).

PKD consisted of three county-level (regional) projects: WEST, EAST and NORTH (pseudonyms). Each project involved researchers, one university or more from the region, NAV offices and selected frontline workers employed at these offices and citizens. The projects were formally owned by the regional authorities; the top administrative level in NAV (the NAV directorate) was assigned the task of “coordinator”, with responsibility for the overall outcome of the programme, but with limited control over the actual collaborative processes. Research and development took place at designated NAV offices and involved selected frontline workers at these offices as well as citizens – either as formal representatives of client organizations or persons interested in participating in the research.

According to the call for projects, projects were free to choose an appropriate service method within the area of “work inclusion”. Furthermore, the projects were to draw on and develop established knowledge-based practices and use what were formulated as “scientific methods” to “contribute to new and testable knowledge” with “transfer value to other NAV offices”. As we will show, interpretations of these knowledge expectations and the outcomes of development of knowledge-based services varied greatly between the regional projects.

The study

Data collection

This study draws on various types of qualitative data collected as part of an official evaluation of the PKD programme in the period from January 2015 to September 2017. The data consist of the following material: first, interviews and group interviews with frontline workers at the NAV offices, representatives of the NAV county division, representatives of client organizations and researchers. We conducted the interviews in three rounds: about half way through the projects (early 2015); towards the end of the projects (mid 2016); and after the projects were finished (early 2017). In total, we collected 83 individual and group interviews. Table 1 provides details about the interviews.

Second, there are written reports from the three projects. These reports include (i) initial project descriptions finalized at the start of the projects; (ii) preliminary sub-reports produced about half way into the projects; and (iii) final reports from the projects. The purpose of the reports was to document the analyses and outcomes of the projects.

Table 1. *Details about the interviews*

	2015	2016	2017
NAV county level	3	5	4
NAV office managers	4	7	6
NAV frontline workers	6	8	7
Researchers	6	7	5
County General	4	3	1
Representatives of client organizations	2	3	1
N=83	26	33	24

Third, there were interviews with the four main representatives of the NAV directorate. We conducted the interviews at two intervals – first, individual interviews approximately half way through the programme (late 2015) and, second, a group interview with all of the representatives after the programme had been finalized (early 2017). We also had several meetings with the project group in the directorate, in addition to dialogue during several presentations of the preliminary results as well as informal conversations at network conferences, where interpretations of the data were discussed.

Fourth, participant observations were made at three network conferences involving all members of the three projects.

Analysis

We analysed the research question – i.e. how notions of appropriate knowledge impact service innovation – with a comparative case analysis approach (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2013). We operationalized the regional projects as specific cases and examined the differences across the three projects and the mechanisms underlying the differences. For the purposes of this article, we focus on two (WEST, EAST) of the three projects because they illustrate the two extremes, or “polar types” (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 27), evidence-based and practice-based knowledge. The third project (NORTH) involved more complex combinations of the two forms of knowledge. The final evaluation report also contains a detailed description of the third project (Breit et al., 2017).

In the analysis, we examined the following elements: (i) the type of knowledge that the projects sought to develop, using the interviews, reports and observations; (ii) how well the knowledge developed met the expectations of the participants, i.e. their degree of (dis)satisfaction with the knowledge and the methods and analyses employed, drawing on the interview data with the project members and the NAV Directorate; (iii) how disagreements regarding knowledge output were handled, also drawing on the interview data; (iv) the outcomes of the regional projects regarding knowledge-based practices, drawing on the project reports and interview material. The reports were particularly useful in this analysis as they all contained distinct chapters on the degree and type of implementation of the project results. To gain some control over possible bias in the project management’s own descriptions of their results, we also used our final round of interviews to explore the extent of the implementation as understood by the project members themselves; and (v) the experiences of using mainly frontline workers regarding the outcomes of the projects, i.e. implementation of new practices; the interview material provided by frontline workers. Table 2 provides a summary of the main results of the analysis.

Table 2. *Overview of the two studied projects*

	WEST	EAST
Objectives	Develop methods to reduce the number of young clients on disability pensions.	Document whether Supported Employment has a positive impact on work inclusion.
Type of knowledge developed	Practice-oriented social work knowledge.	Evidence-based knowledge on more active use of employers and ordinary workplaces.
Disagreements due to differing knowledge expectations on the part of participants (NAV, researchers, clients)	Considerable disagreements: NAV critical of the lack of focus on evidence ("what works").	No disagreement.
Handling of disagreements	Isolation of the researchers. Limited practical collaboration.	–
Implementation of knowledge-based services	No implementation.	High degree of implementation.
Experiences of the frontline workers regarding project outcomes	Positive experiences about the process. Disappointment due to lack of recognition and implementation.	Generally positive experiences. Some criticism due to interference with ongoing projects.

As part of the analytical process, we wrote extended reports on each of the three projects and distributed them to the project participants. Although we acknowledge the fundamental subjectivity of our claims and interpretations, we nevertheless believe that we have a decent understanding of the projects and their outcomes.

Analysis of the projects

WEST: Practice-based knowledge

The overall objective of the WEST project was to reduce the number of young clients (aged 25–30) in receipt of disability pensions. Concern on the part of the NAV county division about the large number of such clients was the reason for this focus. Two NAV offices were involved in the project, which involved examination of the application of two established work assessment methods adapted from health and drugs services, one at each NAV office. The project included the establishment of a user forum at the two NAV offices and collaboration with the university regarding student awareness of NAV.

The project sought to develop practical knowledge on the use and experience of the two assessment methods for frontline workers and clients. According to the final report of the West project, the epistemological focus was on “knowledge

that contains participant orientation and action orientation”. This focus was achieved, for example, by explicating tacit knowledge and exploring how to implement the knowledge in practice.

The strong link between the project and social work was a key reason for the focus on practical knowledge. Many of the frontline workers at the NAV offices who participated in the project were social workers and both the educational institution and the researchers represented social work. The emphasis on social work was realized methodologically by using micro-level interview and observational data with frontline workers and clients and by highlighting detailed narrative analyses of the data. The development of client participation by the NAV also had priority and contributed to the emphasis on social work:

We had a slightly different approach [than the other two projects]. We thought we had to be faithful to client participation, and we have kept that focus. (Researcher)

Throughout the project, the frontline workers, researchers and clients found the collaboration positive. The researchers collaborated closely with the frontline workers, who played the role of “co-researchers” – i.e. working as prescribed by the methods, collecting data and participating in discussions with the researchers about the methods. The role of co-researcher was appreciated by the counsellors, as in the following example:

In the first phase it was a bit chaotic. Who was supposed to do what? But then [the researchers] became more involved, and I thought it was exciting when they were in the office. We have gradually approached each other and developed really good collaboration. We have got better at asking for what we need and they are more proactive towards us. (Frontline worker)

A key reason for this positive experience is arguably the opportunity to work according to a logic of “pure” (social work) professionalism (Breit, Fossetøl, and Andreassen, 2017; Noordegraaf, 2007). This social work professionalism has generally been difficult to maintain at the NAV offices because of the strong influence of an administrative mode of work, which has emphasized performance management over professional (social work) competence (see Røysum, 2013).

However, despite positive experiences at the micro level, there was also disagreement between the NAV county division and the researchers during the project. The county division wanted to know whether the assessment methods had or did not have an effect on the number of young disability pension clients in the county. The county division reported considerable scepticism regarding the micro and narrative-oriented research design and also the findings;

this scepticism was based on the contention that the studies did not provide sufficient documentation on the impact of the methods. This position is exemplified in the following:

If the researchers could document more convincingly that this [method] works better, and not just because the counsellors have fewer users, then this would be important to us. But you live on a different planet if you think NAV will get their budget quadrupled, and that is the only way it will work. (Manager in NAV county division)

In contrast, the researchers argued against using a more evidence-oriented approach because it did not capture the complexity entailed in the practical use of the methods. Given their belief that “there is no quick fix” regarding the interpretation and operationalization of findings regarding cause and effect, the researchers did not want to conduct an effect study. The following is an example of their position:

Effects, we are asked about them all the time. When you talk about effects, you need to measure them against something. And they [the NAV county division] have not taken into account that this is a qualitative study. ... Not that an RCT [randomised controlled study] wouldn't be useful, but our focus was to explore the methods, so an RCT design wouldn't have been appropriate. (WEST, Research leader)

The disagreements between the NAV county division and the researchers in the project led to increasing isolation from the central administration, i.e. both the county division and the directorate. This isolation was possible in part because the university acted in the capacity of project manager, and in part because the NAV county division, as one of the two partner owners (together with the County General – *Fylkesmannen*, the states' representative in the counties of Norway), distanced itself from the owner role. This meant minimizing their involvement in the project and the number of meetings they attended. Moreover, the researchers were wary of receiving help from the directorate, which they felt was trying to alter the project design in the wrong direction. The researchers felt that they were providing important and useful knowledge and wanted to carry on with their research despite criticism and efforts to alter the course of the project.

The project did not lead to any significant implementation of new practices at the NAV offices. This was due to a lack of support from the NAV county division and also to the limited scope and interest on the part of NAV offices for allocating resources of their own to continue the project's work. The most substantial result of the project was the establishment of the youth client

participation forum, which subsequently aroused interest in other NAV areas. This forum had high priority in the project and also received some support from other areas in NAV.

At the end of the project, the frontline workers in the participating NAV offices reported disappointment with the project outcomes. Although they were satisfied with being “co-researchers” in the projects, at the same time they experienced dissonance as the project did not lead to substantial changes at the offices. They attributed some of the challenges to the researchers’ lack of substantial knowledge about the NAV system:

In retrospect, you could think [the researchers] should have spent more time [in the office] in getting an overview of how things work around here. It got very narrow. ... A lot was new to them, and I’m unsure how much of the bigger picture they understood. (Frontline worker)

In addition, the frontline workers were frustrated at having “to return to normal” after the project had ended. This “normality” involved deteriorated conditions for their clients, as their portfolio was expanded:

I know the feeling; before and after the project: “yes, you were in the project, but now it’s back to everyday life in NAV”. I have been told a number of times that “yes, we know that close and individual follow-up helps, but now the project is over”.

EAST: Evidence-based knowledge

The main objective of the EAST project was to conduct an RCT study of Supported Employment in NAV. Supported Employment is an umbrella term for various interventions focusing on different client groups (Bond, 2004; Drake, Bond and Becker, 2012; Nøkleby, Blaasvær and Berg, 2017). A common element is a strong emphasis on the active use of ordinary employment as an arena for vocational rehabilitation, used according to the “place-then-train” approach. Another common element is the use of “employment specialists” or “job coaches”, who provide close support to clients and employers. The project was carried out in two counties and at four NAV offices (two in each county), operating as test arenas for the study. It was managed by researchers from a nearby university college.

The project was based on the assertion that knowledge about the effects of Supported Employment in the Norwegian context was lacking. There has been increasing focus on the use of Supported Employment by labour and welfare services in recent years, as part of an attempt to “insource” (to procure in-house)

parts of Supported Employment that had previously been handled almost entirely by external providers. Hence, in order to legitimate this process, there was a pre-existing focus on the need for evidence about Support Employment in NAV. More specifically, the focus on Supported Employment in the project originated from one of the participating NAV offices that had been interested in the method for some time and wanted to know how they could apply it at NAV.

Hence the epistemological and methodological design applied by the EAST project was significantly different to that of the WEST project, as the emphasis in the former was on studying the possible impact of Supported Employment. The EAST project also interpreted the directorate's call for projects differently than the WEST project. The EAST project primarily understood that the call concerned a need for knowledge on methods that would involve employers more actively in work inclusion efforts. This perception of the role of the employers and of ordinary workplaces has been a central divider between NAV and social work traditions in Norway that have generally been more closely affiliated with a "train-then-place" approach (Hutchinson and Oltedal, 2017). Similar to the researchers in WEST, the researchers in EAST had limited knowledge of NAV and of Supported Employment in particular. The overall design and work organization of the project meant that the researchers helped to produce the "evidence".

Unlike the WEST project, the EAST project did not experience disagreement between participants. The frontline workers, the NAV county division, the clients and the researchers basically agreed on the epistemological focus of the project and methods. Hence there was a higher degree of consensus in the project regarding the knowledge to be generated; it revolved around the development of evidence-based knowledge regarding Supported Employment in general and the concrete work practices and organization of the job specialists in particular.

Accordingly, most participants in the project reported positive experiences. The front line workers underlined that – as in the WEST project – the East project provided them with an opportunity to follow up clients more closely than normal. They were also able to use their skills to make contact with employers and thus to work outside the NAV office to a considerable extent. They were generally highly motivated to work in the intervention, as typified by the following example:

We want to be allowed to keep working [in Supported Employment]; we see that it has a purpose. We believe in this. We want our NAV office to get additional funding so that NAV (the central administration) will realize that [Supported Employment] should be part of frontline services. We have learned a lot that we can hopefully put to good use further on. (Frontline worker)

At the same time, frontline workers were sceptical about the extra reporting required for the RCT. This was caused by the fidelity analyses, which sought to determine the extent to which they actually worked according to the intervention. They were also sceptical about interfaces with other “ordinary” frontline workers at the NAV office, who were supposed to refer some of their clients to the Supported Employment intervention. The likelihood that the client would be randomized for the control group, and thus first become motivated to participate in ordinary employment only to hear that they would receive follow-up work as before, was a key reason for not doing so.

I know some counsellors don't refer clients to us because they are afraid they will be randomized into the control group and experience another setback. They don't seem to understand the reason behind control groups. But if you just get proper research, you have a leg to stand on later on [in convincing others of the impact of Supported Employment]. (Frontline worker)

In contrast to the WEST project, the EAST project also involved a fruitful relationship with the county division and directorate. The county division was clearly interested in developing the “evidence” for Supported Employment, but also in more specific terms in developing a common understanding and language across the NAV offices, which previously they saw as having been relatively unsystematic. Objectives were:

To get common words, terms, professionalism, to help us systematically develop our knowledge. That NAV offices, county, researchers and clients can talk together, and agree on what kind of knowledge is needed, what the actual knowledge is and how it's relevant in practice. (Representative of the NAV county division)

The county division considered a closer connection with the researchers at the university college useful; previously, they had had limited cooperation with them regarding labour and welfare knowledge. Hence, in a broader sense, the project also became part of a regional strategy for NAV and the university college. The directorate, in turn, emphasized the positive experiences of collaboration. As a member of the directorate put it:

EAST worked together with us, they were curious. It was team play, they made use of our competence and we had a dialogue. And we learnt a lot about steering and ... dialogue-based project development in this process. (Member of the NAV directorate)

Also, the clients considered the EAST project successful, according to a separate report focusing on client participation. Client participation is one of the central

dimensions in the Supported Employment interventions and clients have – like in WEST – been involved in the administrative functions of the project. In addition, the researchers attempted to involve the clients in the project's development by having them act as “co-researchers” and participate in the client forum, but this was less successful as there were problems in securing the attendance of clients at subsequent meetings, especially if they had received job offers.

The EAST project has entailed a relatively high degree of implementation, first and foremost by employing Supported Employment job specialists at the participating NAV offices. Most of the offices decided to reallocate funds and hire additional job specialists. Some of the participating NAV offices also received additional funding from the MLSA as part of the broader process of returning responsibility for tasks back in-house, which further contributed to the implementation of the experience gained from the project. In addition to knowledge for the job specialists, EAST also developed a learning system – focusing on the type of competence needed to perform and implement Supported Employment in NAV offices – that was tested and implemented at the NAV offices throughout the project.

Discussion of the findings: The impact of a knowledge hierarchy on service innovation

As we have seen, the design, processual development and implementation of new practices differed considerably between the EAST and the WEST projects. On the one hand, the EAST project led to the implementation of new occupational roles and new work practices at the NAV offices. The success of the EAST project can be attributed to close consonance between the epistemological and methodological legitimacy of the project at NAV, which was achieved not only by developing “evidence” around new methods, but also by strengthening knowledge about work inclusion or a “place-then-train” approach, which constitutes the focus of policy and organizational attention at NAV. The project met limited resistance precisely because it was well suited to the broader institutional changes, even though there was some criticism from frontline workers regarding the design and focus.

On the other hand, the WEST project did not lead to any significant changes in the work practices at NAV – in spite of it leading to new understanding of youth participation. Notwithstanding an apparent alliance between frontline workers, clients and the researchers, the strong focus on practical and experiential knowledge, which was closely connected with social work, proved to be a central challenge for the project. Even though the knowledge developed had substantial legitimacy and a strong foothold in the field of social work in Norway

(Hutchinson and Oltedal, 2017), it was generally rejected by NAV, both at the county level and centrally.

These two very different project trajectories are interesting because they raise the question of the impact of the knowledge hierarchy at NAV on the types of services most appropriate for development. The methods used in RCT studies, which are high in the knowledge hierarchy, are generally considered the “gold standard” (see, for example, Pawson, 2006, p. 49; Timmermans and Berg, 2010). Further down the hierarchy one can find process evaluations, formative studies and action research like those undertaken in the WEST project. Judging from these two projects, an epistemological orientation perceived to be lower in the knowledge hierarchy will, in the end, mean less legitimacy for the knowledge developed. By extension, the risk of questions and negative assessments regarding the studies and methods employed will be higher.

The concept of a knowledge hierarchy has traditionally been associated with the healthcare domain. Our analysis also raises the question of whether the impact of a knowledge hierarchy on the assessment of research and service development is also being transferred to labour and welfare services. Although the use of a knowledge hierarchy in a field more focused on natural science is understandable, it may be problematic when it becomes equally influential in the field of labour and welfare, which is within the realm of the social sciences. Although it is not likely that the knowledge hierarchy will obtain the standing it has in healthcare, it may eventually lead to a greater variety of knowledge forms, and not merely to processual and formative research, but also to forms of evidence-based knowledge and practice.

In this emerging context of evidence hierarchy, frontline service agencies such as the NAV offices are forced to assess and navigate different – and at times conflicting – knowledge demands. A conflict of this kind is particularly evident in the WEST project. Participants in the project confronted a strong research milieu focusing on micro and process-oriented social work. At the same time, they were required by the central authorities to further develop a type of knowledge that differs from the one they initially set out to develop together with the researchers. Another conflict involves the types of practices deemed most legitimate, i.e. evidence-based interventions and the use of manuals and routines on the one hand, and professional experience and discretion on the other.

Importantly, these knowledge discussions are not only taking place on the level of project administration, but also impact on the frontline workers. Again, this impact was especially evident in the WEST project, where the two participating NAV offices found themselves in the middle of a discussion between the researchers and the NAV county level on research design. The frontline workers reported feeling powerless when the research to which they had contributed was criticized or deemed irrelevant by their own organization.

Finally, the analysis of the challenges in the WEST project is relatively simplistic and there are also other contributing factors. For instance, in defending their critique of the WEST project, the directorate and the NAV county division argued that they were critical of the quality of the analyses and not of the research design. The problem was thus framed as one of underdeveloped research and not one of the “wrong” research design. Yet, from an outside evaluator’s perspective, many of the analyses were of adequate quality and would seem to have some relevance for NAV and the development of their services. Hence, these interpretations showcase the complex interconnections between the perceived “rigour” and “relevance” (cf. Rynes, Bartunek and Daft, 2001; van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) of the knowledge developed in PKD. An important observation from this study is that it is often difficult to clearly distinguish between criticism directed at the quality of the research and criticism directed at the epistemological and/or methodological orientation of the research in these kinds of collaborative efforts.

Conclusions

In this article, we have focused on the legitimacy of certain forms of knowledge in service development processes. We have shown how these development processes may involve differing assessments of appropriate knowledge among the institutional actors involved and hence constrain the collaboration processes and outcomes in various ways. According to our empirical analysis of the NORTH and EAST projects, the legitimacy of evidence-based knowledge and the related illegitimacy of more formative and processual studies in the realm of social work have been obvious. This suggests that the question of knowledge legitimacy arguably plays a key – and yet understudied – role in such service innovation processes.

Our study raises questions regarding the impact of a knowledge hierarchy on the development of services in the labour and welfare sector and an apparently greater impact of evidence-based knowledge in service areas traditionally dominated by practice-based knowledge. We echo the emphasis given by Ferlie et al. (2013, p. 192) to the importance of addressing the nature of knowledge itself in order to bridge the gap between different institutionalized understandings of knowledge in service development efforts. While there is considerable (and growing) understanding of the collaborative dynamics between stakeholders with different understandings of objectives and means (Bommert, 2010; Torfing, 2016), there is less knowledge about the implications of epistemological differences and how they can be handled. Although pursuit of different types of knowledge seems to be an obvious strategy for the development of holistic and integrated services to solve social problems, there is also the risk that some forms

of knowledge may become “more equal than others” and hence narrow the composition of knowledge in the services (see Pawson, 2006).

Our experiences indicate that different tasks require different types of knowledge in labour and welfare services. Implementation of evidence-based interventions with fidelity scales¹ requires another form of knowledge than efforts to mobilize user participation. Hence, no necessary or absolute opposites between practice-based and evidence-based knowledge apparently exist. The challenge for collaborative efforts in service innovation therefore seems to be one of recognizing the relevance of different types and standings of knowledge as well as of clarifying what type of knowledge is needed under different circumstances.

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1. In the use of empirical evidence to foster innovation in service deliver, fidelity refers to the degree of implementation of an evidence-based practice. Accordingly, a fidelity scale measures fidelity.

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Co-production and social innovation in street-level employability services: Lessons from services with lone parents in Scotland

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Abstract The United Kingdom, as an exemplar liberal welfare state, has been characterized as in the vanguard of “work-first” activation – deploying high levels of compulsion and standardized employability services that seek to move people from welfare to work as quickly as possible. However, despite the extension of welfare conditionality to excluded groups such as lone parents, government-led, work-first employability programmes have often proved ineffective at assisting the most vulnerable to escape poverty or even just to progress in the labour market. We argue that alternative approaches, defined by co-production and social innovation, have the potential to be more successful. We draw on a study of local services targeting lone parents led by third

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sector–public sector partnerships in five localities in Scotland. Our research identifies a link between programme governance and management (defined by co-governance and collaborative partnership-working) and co-produced street-level services that deliver benefits in terms of social innovation and employability. We draw on 90 interviews with lone parents, and more than 100 interviews with delivery stakeholders and street-level workers, to identify factors associated with positive social and employability outcomes. The article concludes by identifying potential lessons for the governance and delivery of future services targeting vulnerable groups.

Keywords social policy, employability, lone parent family, vulnerable groups, activation, Scotland, United Kingdom

Introduction

Employability programmes targeting lone parents in liberal welfare states such as the United Kingdom (UK) have focused on combining high levels of welfare conditionality with compulsory “work-first” activation in an attempt to move people into paid employment as quickly as possible. However, despite the claims made by UK government policy-makers that the contracting-out of these services would deliver personalization and innovation in street-level engagement with welfare recipients, there is evidence that the specific needs of disadvantaged groups, such as lone parents, are rarely met by work-first activation, which has instead delivered increasingly standardized provision (Considine et al., 2017).

The failure of mainstream employability programmes to offer innovative solutions to the complex barriers faced by lone parents and others has led some to make the case for alternative forms of governance that might support genuinely personalized services (Fuentes and Lindsay, 2016). Co-production has re-emerged as an important concept in these debates, capturing the potential value of mechanisms that allow for the pooling of the assets of organizations and street-level professionals delivering services and their service users to achieve better outcomes (Pestoff, 2012). A growing literature seeks to make connections between co-production and the related concept of social innovation. For our purposes, social innovation refers to a collaborative process of improving services for disadvantaged groups and delivering publicly desired outcomes (Bovaird and Löffler, 2016).

This article contributes to these debates by drawing on empirical data to explore how features of programme governance and management can contribute to

innovation in the delivery of personalized employability support. We deploy the concepts of co-production and social innovation to discuss the experiences of stakeholders, street-level workers and lone parents involved in Making It Work (MIW), a voluntary employability-building programme led by third sector–public sector partnerships that delivered services in five localities in Scotland. The concepts of co-governance and co-management are used to discuss collaborative approaches that engaged a range of stakeholders in the design, planning, resourcing and delivery of services and, we argue, facilitated social innovation through co-production between service users and street-level workers.

Following this introduction, we discuss the literature on social innovation and co-production, and its relevance to employability services. We then discuss the policy context: how various levels of government in the UK have sought to address barriers to employability faced by lone parents, and the significance of co-production to debates on the governance and delivery of services. Next, we describe the MIW programme and our research methods, before discussing our findings on how this programme emphasized co-production as a route to both enhanced employability and social innovation. We conclude by identifying lessons for the governance and delivery of future employability services.

Social innovation and co-production in employability services

Social innovation has been deployed in differing contexts and with reference to a variety of policy agendas. This has led some to claim that social innovation is weakly conceptualized (Bovaird and Löffler, 2016) – “a nebulous, amorphous catch-all concept” (Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2016, p. 666). A critical literature also attacks the social innovation discourse as legitimizing a neoliberal project of shifting responsibility for social wellbeing from a retreating state to the individual (Fougere et al., 2017). For the purposes of our research, we focus on an emerging literature that coalesces around a number of defining themes in social innovation. Social innovation involves “activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social” (Mulgan et al., 2007, p. 8). Social innovation provides “a novel solution to a social problem that is more efficient, effective and sustainable than existing solutions and for which value created accrues primarily to society as a whole” (Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2016, p. 666). Social innovations create “new social relationships or collaborations that are not only good for society but also enhance society’s capacity to act ... social innovations empower people by giving them a voice, allowing them to participate and increasing their capabilities” (Sirovatka and Greve, 2014, p. 81). At delivery level, social innovations are defined by the empowerment of communities and grassroots

organizations, and finally users, to develop participative solutions (Sirovatka and Greve, 2014). In this context, users are “not simply passive consumers of services but active participants who co-create, trial and implement innovations and, through actively using these innovations, help to diffuse service innovations” (Windrum et al., 2016, p. 153).

In the field of employability services, social innovation has emerged as a model that might help policy-makers and street-level bureaucrats to arrive at the personalized approaches often promised but rarely delivered by mainstream activation (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016). It has been suggested that viewing the employability policy agenda through the lens of social innovation might lead us towards more responsive modes of local service provision, “new labour market integration processes” and “new forms of participation” (Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2016, p. 667). Ewert and Evers (2014) report on social innovation in employability services (including those serving lone parents) in a number of European Union (EU) Member States, identifying recurring themes including:

- the production of tailored services that reflect complex and/or new social risks, rather than one-size-fits-all standardization – “the innovative nature of tailored services stems to a significant extent from their ability to react continuously to changing life situations” (Ewert and Evers, 2014, p. 428);
- the establishment of coalitions of action – by fostering organizational arrangements that operate in a more embedded and networked way, establishing mechanisms to give voice to communities and groups, and building issue-related coalitions;
- innovative approaches to funding and ways of working – including the establishment of new street-level roles that combine previously fragmented knowledge; combining resources from different stakeholders; building working collectives;
- crucially, co-production with service users – approaches that invest in users’ capabilities and tap their assets, rather than stigmatizing them (Evers and Ewert, 2015); “within service arrangements trusting relationships based on co-production are more likely if the strengths and assets of service users are taken into account and used as a positive foundation that services can build on ... enabling users, instead of blaming them for their shortcomings” (Ewert and Evers, 2014, p. 427).

Ewert and Evers’s (2014) emphasis on the value of co-production as a key concept in building more responsive and innovative employability services connects with a growing evidence base on “what works” in street-level practice to support people with complex needs to escape poverty and/or progress in the labour market (Lindsay et al., forthcoming). Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) and Pestoff (2012) have differentiated between “co-production” at the frontline, where users produce and shape their own services in collaboration with street-level workers, and two potential facilitating mechanisms: “co-governance”, in

which different stakeholders participate actively in the design and planning of services on the basis of shared decision-making and responsibility; and “co-management”, referring to collaboration across stakeholders in resourcing and delivery, based on the idea that services will be more effective where resources and expertise are pooled among different organizations and stakeholder groups. These inter-connected concepts of co-production, co-governance and co-management have been deployed to explore the design and delivery of personalised services for vulnerable groups such as the long-term unemployed (Pestoff, 2012) and lone parents experiencing poverty (Lindsay et al., 2018).

This understanding of interlinked co-production mechanisms as a route to social innovation (Bovaird and Löffler, 2016) provides the starting point for our research. Below, we follow Brandsen and Pestoff’s (2006) framing of co-governance, co-management and co-production to report on an exploration of collaboration and innovation in employability services for a vulnerable user group, namely unemployed lone parents. We also discuss evidence of social innovation benefits in line with themes established by Ewert and Evers (2014). Our findings draw on in-depth research with service users, caseworkers and key stakeholders involved in the co-production of employability services for lone parents in Scotland.

Context and research methods

The policy context

Policy interventions targeting lone parents in Scotland are a shared responsibility across local, Scottish and UK governments.¹ The UK Government has been responsible for substantial changes to the conditionality regime governing benefits for unemployed lone parents in recent years. From 2001, lone parents claiming benefits have been subject to increasing compulsory activation, initially through the requirement to attend work-focused interviews, which since 2004

1. The Scottish Government is the devolved administration of Scotland, one of the constituent nations of the UK. Since the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999, the parliament has legislative competence, and the Scottish Government has implemented policy, in a number of areas of social policy, including health and education. Employability and welfare legislation and policies have been largely reserved (retained) by the central UK Government (with the exception of some complementary local anti-poverty and employability initiatives supported by the Scottish Government). From 2018, further devolution will see the control of some welfare policies (although not the main unemployment benefits) and all employability/activation budgets become the responsibility of the Scottish Government.

have been mandatory for all new and existing claimants. Since 2008, claimants have been subject to “lone parent obligations”, which have effectively moved most lone parents onto the UK Government’s mainstream unemployment benefit, Jobseeker’s Allowance (thus exposing these claimants to many of the same conditions and job-seeking requirements imposed upon other unemployed people). Meanwhile, the UK reports among the lowest lone parent benefit replacement rates of all Member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Campbell et al., 2016).

At the UK level, the state’s main employability interventions for lone parents are delivered through Jobcentre Plus (the public employment service, which governs benefit conditionality rules and polices compulsory job search activities) and the Work and Health Programme (a recent rebranding of the Work Programme (WP), a contracted-out activation programme targeting all long-term unemployed people and some other job-seeker groups). There has been consistent criticism of both elements of the UK employability regime. Research has found that Jobcentre Plus services are often viewed negatively by lone parents (Skills Network, 2014). The introduction of the WP from 2010 “marked a significant increase the marketization of employment services” (Sainsbury, 2017, p. 56), and it has been suggested that the contractualism and competition that define the programme limit opportunities for collaboration among providers, and between street-level employability workers and service users (Lindsay et al., 2018). The WP has reported relatively poor job entry outcomes for lone parents – it may be that its payment-by-results model, which rewards contractors for job entries, in fact incentivises the “parking” of such vulnerable groups (Lindsay et al., 2014). Qualitative studies have found that WP services for lone parents are “narrow, focusing predominantly on job search and application processes” (Kozek and Kubisa, 2016, p. 121). For those entering employment, jobs are often characterized by low pay, poor progression opportunities and a lack of long-term sustainability (Skills Network, 2014).

From 2018, mainstream employability provision in Scotland currently delivered through WP and other UK Government initiatives will be devolved and fall under the responsibilities of the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government has adopted a rather inconsistent approach to the governance and content of employability services. Since 2006, it has funded Local Employability Partnerships – local government-level services that have targeted disadvantaged groups and communities, and which arguably emphasize collaboration and co-governance more than is found within UK Government-funded programmes (Sutherland et al. 2015). The Scottish Government (2016, p. 4) argues that from 2018 its replacement for DWP programmes will similarly be “designed and delivered in partnership”, but early evidence suggests a strong degree of continuity with the UK model’s payment-by-results contractualism.

Nevertheless, the Scottish Government has instructed providers to encourage voluntary participation, rather than relying on compulsion and the threat of benefit sanctions.

Scotland also provides an interesting context for this research because ideas such as co-production and social innovation are gaining increasing currency in policy debates. Whereas these concepts have little foothold in the dominant New Public Management (NPM) approach to governance elsewhere in the UK, Scottish policy-makers appear somewhat more comfortable with post-NPM approaches that focus on collaboration. While there is debate as to whether the Scottish Government's rhetoric is always matched by practice, there is evidence of the emergence of co-production-based approaches, especially in healthcare. The Scottish Government also funds local initiatives across a variety of social policy areas through a Social Innovation Fund, designed to "test social innovation ideas and prototypes to find out if they work in practice" [and support] "sustaining and/or scaling up and growing social innovations that work" (Scottish Government, 2017, p. 2). A number of third sector organizations (TSOs) have similarly sought to influence the UK Government to focus on social innovation (e.g. Nesta, 2017), and local pilots have been funded to test small-scale projects, although under recent UK-level Conservative administrations social innovation has been somewhat subsumed within a largely vacuous 'Big Society' agenda (Bochel, 2011). As noted above, in Scotland, Scottish Government support for co-production and social innovation in the specific field of employability has been more erratic, but the policy context nevertheless made for an interesting testing ground for local partnerships co-producing services with lone parents.

Making It Work and our research

The research reported here was carried out as part of a commissioned evaluation of MIW. MIW was a programme of intensive, personalized support targeting lone parents facing substantial barriers to employability. The programme received 7 million pounds (GBP) in grant funding from the Big Lottery Fund in Scotland ("The Fund"). The Fund is a non-departmental public body responsible for distributing 40 per cent of all funds raised for good causes by the UK's National Lottery. The aim of the Fund's support for MIW was to engage lone parents voluntarily and assist participants to progress towards employment and other positive family and social outcomes.

MIW delivered services between 2013 and 2017 in five Scottish local government areas: Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire. During that period, 3,115 lone parents were supported by MIW,

with approximately 30 per cent entering employment. The programme had a number of notable features:

- governance in the form of local partnerships of public and third sector stakeholders, in an effort to design local provision that was genuinely additional to mainstream services;
- personalized support provided through a keyworker² model, with street-level workers based in local communities managing a small caseload and providing flexible, intensive and sustained support – the quality of the relationship between service user and keyworker was crucial (Parr, 2016);
- a range of services, including personal development (e.g. confidence building, financial capability) and pre-vocational and vocational training;
- transitional funding and other support for lone parents to access childcare;
- signposting to a range of other employability, learning and wellbeing services.

Our research covered all four years of the programme, but the data reported here cover 2013–2016. The research involved semi-structured interviews with stakeholders engaged in the design and delivery of MIW. These included project managers, delivery partners and keyworkers. A purposive sampling approach was taken, working with MIW partnership leads to identify relevant contacts. Interviews focused on a range of issues covering the governance, management and content of the MIW programme, including: collaboration between partners and engagement with other employability services; approaches to engaging lone parents and the content of services; the roles and expertise of specific partners; and challenges engaging employers and matching lone parents to appropriate jobs. We conducted 104 stakeholder interviews (34 in 2014; 35 in 2015; 35 in 2016).

Our research also involved semi-structured interviews with lone parents participating in MIW. A purposive, non-randomized sampling frame was utilized here, involving the research team working with partnerships to identify service users at different stages of engagement with MIW and who were willing to participate in the research and available for interview during the fieldwork periods. We conducted 90 MIW service user interviews over three years (36 in 2014; 34 in 2015; 20 in 2016). Our sample included service users reporting a variety of experiences, and a range of barriers to employability. It included some who had transitioned to work or training and those who continued to face barriers to progression. All but one of the interviewees was female, and they ranged in age from 20 to 47 years. Interviews focused on users' barriers to work, challenges in supporting their families and accessing childcare, and experiences

2. Throughout this article we have used the term keyworker to refer to street-level workers performing these roles. A variety of terms were used by MIW partnerships to describe these functions including development workers, support workers and keyworkers.

engaging with MIW. We have discussed elsewhere the complex barriers reported by users, reflecting MIW's success in engaging those further from the labour market (Batty et al., 2017).

Findings

Our findings focus first on evidence of co-governance and co-management as a model for the funding, organization and management of services with lone parents, before moving on to explore outcomes in relation to co-production and social innovation.

Co-governance and co-management for innovation

As a non-departmental public body, The Fund enjoyed substantial independence in establishing the parameters for funding awards under MIW. Its invitation to tender emphasized the need to evidence a practical plan for collaborative governance that would facilitate partnership-working, and a justification for the inclusion of a range of partner organizations. Bidding consortia were required to demonstrate that they had formed inter-disciplinary partnerships that had wide expertise and could deliver services tailored to lone parents' needs.

There is evidence that partnering with the third sector can enhance the quality and reach of employability services (Lindsay et al., 2014), and accordingly TSOs are increasingly seen as key players in facilitating user co-production in social innovation (Windrum et al., 2016). The funder's encouragement of collaboration, indeed co-governance, with the third sector allowed for the inclusion of TSO partners with particular expertise in supporting lone parents, including grassroots charities run by and for lone parents such as Gingerbread (in the Fife partnership area) and One Parent Families Scotland (a national TSO whose local workers played varying roles in different MIW partnerships). Such TSOs brought expert knowledge to partnerships and won credibility among service users.

Rather than relying on payment-by-results contracting, the resources brought by and allocated to MIW partner organizations were governed by relatively flexible partnership memoranda and service level agreements. As we will discuss, these formal mechanisms allowed for substantial flexibility in shaping and reshaping services to respond to service users' aspirations and needs. The sharing of grant funding based on consensus also guarded against some of the unintended consequences often reported under payment-by-results contracting, such as unnecessary competition between partners to "claim" job entries, and "creaming and parking", whereby efforts are focused on those closer to the

labour market who are more likely to achieve a job outcome, at the expense of those facing more severe barriers. Stakeholders argued that a collaborative approach had allowed for consensus to emerge on strategies to target lone parents facing severe and/or multiple barriers to work.

We still go for the clients that are furthest away from the labour market. We've had clients referred to us who are very job ready, who might have fallen out of work within the last six months. We wouldn't take them as a MIW client, we would pass them on to the job brokerage service [local employability services providing job matching for those close to the labour market], who specifically deal with just putting someone straight back into work. That's not what we see our job as being. (Lead Partner, South Lanarkshire, 2015)

The discussion above suggests that some of the defining features of successful social innovation were present in MIW. Supported by collaborative governance and flexible grant-based funding, MIW partners were able to establish new ways of working, and build coalitions of action based on a consensus on the need for innovative solutions; by combining resources and expertise from a diverse group of stakeholders, MIW established new multilateral networks of public and third sector actors (Ewert and Evers, 2014).

There is evidence that this collaborative governance model facilitated the co-management of innovative, street-level services. Mainstream employability programmes in the UK increasingly focus on standardised work-first provision (Considine et al., 2017), often marginalising (especially TSO) providers who offer a broader range of tailored services (Heins and Bennett, 2016). In contrast, the co-governance arrangements that bound stakeholders together within MIW partnerships also informed a collaborative approach to the co-management and delivery of multifaceted services on the ground. Our research with service users found that many had chosen to engage with more than one of the different services provided by a range of MIW partners, including, for example: keyworker support; confidence and self-efficacy-building activities; vocational training; wellbeing advice; debt management; work experience placements; and volunteering. So, MIW appears to have offered the “tailored, responsive services ... rather than one-size-fits-all standardisation” that has been identified as indicative of employability programmes defined by social innovation (Ewert and Evers, 2014, p. 428). MIW partnerships also provided and/or signposted lone parents to childcare during employability-focused activities and once in work. Previous studies of employability initiatives that have delivered social innovation and empowered parents note the importance of the employability-childcare nexus and the value of “linking access to jobs and day care ... something especially important for single parent families” (Evers and Ewert, 2015, p. 115).

Our interviews with stakeholders found a commitment to managing services collaboratively so that users experienced a seamless, joined-up offer. This was achieved through co-location of employees from different organizations, team-building and shared learning sessions, regular case meetings, and (as highlighted above) recognition of each other's expertise and added value formed during gradual processes of partnership formation and service co-design. Our research with lone parents suggested that partners were largely successful in communicating that a wide range of services were available (Batty et al., 2017). MIW's flexible funding and collaborative governance empowered managers, keyworkers and service users to invest time and effort in building joined-up services and ensured that there was freedom to adapt the programme to meet lone parents' needs. This flexible approach appears to have been understood by delivery partners, who commended the funder for trusting partnerships to develop services in collaboration with lone parents.

... If you need something to change, it changes, it happens. They [MIW leadership team] always are constantly asking for feedback from us and from clients and, if things don't work, we don't do them again. We do something different. We make changes. So, if I've got a group of clients, I'll say, "What do you want?" and I'll go back to my manager. And these things have been put in place as a result of that, so I feel quite confident. (MIW Keyworker, South Lanarkshire, 2015)

The co-management of collaborative street-level services in this case appears to have delivered the sort of provision sought by policy-makers promoting social innovation – these services combined knowledge and resources from different stakeholders to build effective, collaborative ways of working and were flexible enough to respond to the changing situations and aspirations of service users (Evers and Ewert, 2015).

Street-level co-production as a route to social innovation?

Our research with MIW stakeholders and users also focused on the co-production of services. First, lone parents engaging with the programme consistently spoke of a sense of empowerment and control over their employability journeys. Whereas many had previously felt pressured – and sometimes even intimidated or humiliated – when engaging with Jobcentre Plus and/or compulsory activation (Davies, 2014), MIW encouraged participants to make choices about the services that they received, the pace of their progress towards paid employment, and the type of work or other activity that was to be their final destination. Lone parents valued the absence of any sense of stigma or judgement, and

consistently referred to how street-level keyworkers supported them to make informed choices.

I didn't really have that many high hopes, to be honest ... but she [MIW keyworker] made me feel at ease straight away. There's like, no judgment whatsoever. She just wants to help you. And it was all about trying to build my confidence up and everything and speaking about what would be the best type of job for me. And what would fit me better and it was always, "Don't go for something that you don't think would suit you. Do something that you know that you can do". (Service User, Edinburgh, 2015)

Evers and Ewert's (2015) research on social innovation and employability services pointed to the importance of avoiding stigmatization if service users are to be engaged as active collaborators in co-producing positive outcomes. Clearly, this has proved problematic in the context of mainstream work-first activation in the UK, where lone parents engaging with compulsory Jobcentre Plus and WP services sometimes report "being treated in a way that made them feel like a non-person" (Skills Network, 2014, p. 20). In contrast, in this case the sense of choice and empowerment reported by service users facilitated the co-production of their progress towards employability. Service users volunteered numerous practical examples of how their choices, preferences or ideas had helped to shape both their own employability journeys and wider programme content.

The relationship between lone parents and street-level keyworkers was central to their shared experiences of co-production and the innovative, personalized employability journeys described by service users. Of course, claims to deliver "personal adviser" support in street-level engagements are ubiquitous in employability programmes, including under work-first activation (van Berkel, 2017), although WP providers have been criticised as offering their staff little scope to offer genuinely tailored services (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016). In this case, MIW keyworkers provided intensive support, assisted by a funding model that meant that caseloads were considerably lower than would normally be reported by WP advisers (Considine et al., 2017). It has been suggested that effective social innovation can involve the establishment of "new professional roles that combine previously fragmented knowledge" delivered through mentors "well connected and trusted in their own communities" (Evers and Ewert, 2015, p. 114), and this was a defining feature of MIW keyworker services. As noted above, keyworkers were given sufficient resources and autonomy to connect lone parents with a range of services, and networked with other public and third sector stakeholders in order both to recruit and support service users. Many keyworkers lived in the (often disadvantaged) communities that they served, and

had a background in community work and/or activism. The central role played by TSOs in delivering MIW (facilitated by co-governance and co-management arrangements) ensured that grassroots organizations and their workers were able to build upon their credibility and trust within local communities. Other keyworkers had worked previously on the WP and other UK Government-funded programmes, sometimes noting the contrast between their prior experience of imposing these forms of compulsory work-first activation with the genuine personalization offered by MIW.

I've never actually worked on a project where I felt like I did make such a difference ... I worked for ... four years on Work Programme and FND [Flexible New Deal]. FND was slightly more flexible, but still big contracts, big companies. You were just a body and a number and processing, whereas this is so much more personal and ... the numbers aren't so big and so vast that you are making that difference to each individual. (MIW Keyworker, South Lanarkshire, 2015)

We should, of course, acknowledge that the choices open to MIW service users were bounded by: the resources and networks available to keyworkers; the availability of local learning, wellbeing and employability services; lone parents' caring and other responsibilities; and (for those seeking to enter work) labour market conditions. Nevertheless, as noted above, service users described engaging with a combination of different support services, again suggesting a measure of choice and personalization. Crucially, lone parents felt that they were "in control".

A final theme from the social innovation literature to emerge from our research relates to the benefits associated with measures that "establish coalitions of action" and "give voice to communities and groups" (Ewert and Evers, 2014, p. 428). Put simply, if co-produced employability services can activate, support and strengthen networks among user communities, then broader social benefits may accrue. Lone parents and keyworkers reported a number of examples of social network-building. Social isolation was common among service users when first engaging with MIW, and growing mutual support networks was a key benefit reported by many. MIW invested heavily in engagement activities to reach out to lone parents, and many described a journey from social isolation to engagement with support networks, personal empowerment, and then progress towards employment.

I was really isolated and I was quite down and stuff, but now I just feel like... I feel like I've got a purpose. I felt like before I was just existing and now I'm living. I'm going to work, and my daughter's at nursery, and I'm getting new friends especially through Making It Work, because I met all the people there and I'm still in

contact with them. I'm out doing things, and I'm off benefits ... I'm providing for my daughter and I'm going out working. I'm getting money because I'm working for it, and even that just makes such a difference. It makes me feel so much better. (Service User, South Lanarkshire, 2016)

A number of local MIW projects established group-based, employability-building activities in a specific attempt to strengthen mutual support networks. As a direct result, there were examples of new community-based collaborations (such as MIW parents working together to form their own childcare “play-group” networks), community activism and volunteering by MIW participants, increased use of local facilities such as community centres and nurseries, and the growth of informal networks.

The social networks that are being formed, and the way that you see someone say: “Well, I'll go and pick up your little one, if you want, and I'll drop them off ...” I think that's a huge part of the groupwork ... they're getting to know each other. They live in the same area. They're befriending each other, and they're supporting each other. (MIW Keyworker, Edinburgh, 2016)

Our analysis suggests that co-production between keyworkers and service users was a defining feature of MIW, facilitated by collaborative funding and organizational structures that allowed for the co-governance and co-management of innovative local services. Many of the benefits and outcomes of social innovation previously identified by Ewert and Evers (2014) and others also appeared to be present. We have acknowledged elsewhere that MIW faced substantial challenges in achieving its objectives: the jobs entered by many lone parents were relatively low-paid; there remained problems in accessing affordable and appropriate childcare; and gaps in local services meant that signposting options (for example to mental health services) were sometimes limited (Batty et al., 2017). Local MIW partnerships also faced challenges in designing programmes that responded to the diverse needs of this group, and in managing the demands on keyworker resources. Nevertheless, service users described an experience that was defined by empowerment and the opportunity to co-produce. Their reflections, and our analysis, provide a sharp contrast with commonly reported experiences of compulsory work-first activation.

Discussion and conclusions

Governments in the UK and other liberal welfare states have sought to justify the extension of conditionality and compulsion in welfare services by claiming that

vulnerable groups such as lone parents have access to personalized employability support delivered through tailored street-level engagement. Yet the evidence suggests that compulsory work-first activation, with participation demanded under the threat of impoverishing benefit sanctions, has failed to respond to the needs of lone parents, while doing considerable harm to the wellbeing of many (Campbell et al., 2016). Our research concerns a limited number of geographies and a highly specific user group. There may also be sample bias associated with engaging service users who volunteered to report their experiences, although the positive reports outlined above included testimony from lone parents who continued to face significant challenges to labour market participation as well as those who had made good progress and/or transitioned into work.

Nevertheless, our research shows that alternatives to contractualized work-first activation are possible. MIW was defined by co-production and delivered a range of beneficial social outcomes. These positive outcomes were facilitated by processes of co-governance and co-management. The funder awarded grants that provided local partnerships with financial stability through 5-year funding agreements and up-front resources to focus on partnership-formation and user engagement – such funding models are likely to be important given that “co-production may require community capacity building, which takes time, effort and requires resources” (Löffler and Bovaird, 2018, p. 418). MIW’s collaborative governance and delivery structures, with a strong co-leadership role for TSOs as a requirement, produced services that were able to draw on the complementary expertise and credibility of a diverse range of partners.

Crucially, these processes of co-governance and co-management provided the context for co-production between MIW’s stakeholders and service users, and the emergence of a number of distinctive outcomes that connect with previous studies of social innovation in the field of employability (Ewert and Evers, 2014). For example, MIW delivered social benefit by offering co-produced, tailored services that were responsive to lone parents’ changing life situations. The programme’s flexible funding and collaborative approach facilitated new coalitions of action at the local level, strengthening social networks and solidarity among community stakeholders and lone parents. Street-level keyworkers were effective in joining-up fragmented knowledge and resources, strengthening access to services within communities and among a user group not well served by existing public services (Evers and Ewert, 2015). And the process of co-production empowered lone parents to make choices, bring their assets to bear on collaborative activities, and shape both their own employability journeys and wider MIW services.

Despite this positive evidence, building on the lessons of programmes like MIW may prove challenging. Social innovation is impossible where the right to “act, organize or provide differently” is denied (Evers and Ewert, 2015, p. 120). The

dominance of NPM governance legacies within the UK public management regime (which, despite political devolution and some distinctive features of a so-called “Scottish approach” to employability, also infect policy-making in Scotland) mean that norms around centralized state control and privatized/contractualized service delivery have proved difficult to challenge (Lindsay et al., forthcoming). Policy-makers sometimes also claim to be unconvinced as to the efficiency and scalability of co-produced social innovations. Indeed, much of the debate on lessons from social innovation for public policy has been “restricted to matters of scaling up small-scale innovations” (Ewert and Evers, 2014, p. 424), and we have noted above that scalability is a key priority for Scottish policy-makers interested in co-production and social innovation (Scottish Government, 2017). Yet, there is an inherent tension between the added value of locally responsive, co-produced social innovations and governments’ desire for evidence of scalability. As Bovaird and Löffler (2016, p. 162) note, social innovations at the local level “are intrinsically less prone to capture by professionals or experts”. Economies of scope rather than scale should be the focus of efforts to transfer lessons from co-produced social innovations. Different approaches need to be tailored to the needs and assets of user groups and communities (Löffler and Bovaird, 2018), so policy transfer should focus on identifying effective principles that support innovation in public services, but which can be applied flexibly in response to local circumstances.

There are viable alternatives to the NPM and work-first norms that have dominated the governance of activation and street-level employability practice in the UK and beyond. Public funders and policy-makers can choose to support, and indeed to demand, collaborative approaches that deliver innovative street-level interventions. A commitment to co-production can empower, and draw on the assets of, excluded social groups such as lone parents. Policy-makers who are serious about addressing complex social problems through new, innovative solutions would do well to learn from local experiments rooted in ideas of co-production and social innovation – collaborative processes that bring about new ways of working to deliver broad social benefit.

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Activating the most disadvantaged youth in Switzerland: Administratively too risky, politically too costly?

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Abstract To increase the chances of integrating youth into labour markets in contemporary European knowledge societies, many policy schemes are geared towards investing in youth's human capital. Since apprenticeship systems are assumed to ease school-to-work transitions, this seems a particularly promising avenue. However, research highlights that social policies often do not reach the most disadvantaged members of society. The aim of this article is to shed light on the reasons and mechanisms causing this phenomenon, called the Matthew effect, through a single, embedded case study of a vocational education and training programme for disadvantaged youth in Switzerland. The findings highlight cream-skimming practices as a coping strategy enabling frontline workers to satisfy strict assessment criteria. A budgetary allocation driven politico-administrative logic

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promotes such practices as a means to generate solid results, so as to safeguard political – and thus financial – support.

Keywords social policy, youth, vulnerable groups, apprentice, employability, Switzerland

Introduction

Throughout Europe, and beyond, youth unemployment and young adults' difficult access to labour markets present governments with a challenge of long standing. The economic and financial crises in 2007–08 further exacerbated this issue. In many European countries, policy attempts at mitigating the problem are increasingly focused on Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems (Nilsson, 2010, p. 263). Indeed, post-compulsory education has become a crucial asset for labour market integration in knowledge societies: structural changes such as tertiarisation, technological evolution and globalization have skewed post-industrial economies towards an increasingly skilled workforce (Bonoli, 2013; Sheldon, 2002). In particular, dual-track VET is often praised for facilitating the school-to-work transition (e.g. Salvisberg and Sacchi, 2014; Stalder, 2012).¹ Thus, it presents a promising political avenue for facilitating the integration of disadvantaged individuals into the labour market.

It is crucial, however, that political efforts reach the most disadvantaged youth who face the biggest obstacles to labour market insertion. Yet, since the mid-1970s, research in social policy has shown that less disadvantaged individuals benefit more from social policy schemes compared to more disadvantaged individuals who are part of the same target group; a phenomenon known as the Matthew effect (Deleeck, 1979; Gal, 1998). Recent research has highlighted the existence of a Matthew Effect in many interventions aimed at facilitating labour market participation. Most studies concentrate on access bias in childcare services (e.g. Bonoli and Champion, 2015; Schlanser, 2011; van Lancker and Ghysels, 2012). Others suggest that similar biases exist in Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) (Bonoli, 2014), or result from the broader functioning of modern welfare states and particularly from the social investment paradigm (Bonoli, Cantillon and van Lancker, 2017; Cantillon, 2011). Needless to say, a Matthew effect can have massive impacts on the life chances of the most vulnerable individuals. Moreover, it affects public finances, contributing to higher social expenditures and forgone

1. Dual-track VET combines practical in-firm training and theoretical school-based education. Hereafter, this article refers to dual-track VET, dual-VET, and apprenticeship interchangeably.

revenue. Therefore, it is in the interest of policy-makers to contain the Matthew effect as much as possible, reaching out to the most vulnerable individuals to enhance the probability and quality of their labour market integration.

The aim of this article is to shed light on the mechanisms and reasons engendering a Matthew effect in a VET programme for disadvantaged Swiss youth. This research is guided by questions of why and how a Matthew effect occurs in training programmes for disadvantaged youth. A Matthew effect in this policy field might have particularly detrimental and long-term repercussions on welfare states and on individual wellbeing. Indeed, youth without post-compulsory education face great difficulties in finding a job, are at high risk of poverty (López Vilapana, 2013) and may face lifelong or recurrent dependence on public support. Additionally, long unemployment spells at young ages can leave long-lasting scarring effects, which substantially decrease future employability, earnings, and quality of employment contracts (Bell and Blanchflower, 2010; Bigos et al., 2013). Eventually, returns on investments in education seem to rapidly decrease with age (Heckman, 2006). Given dual-VET's strength in facilitating school-to-work transitions, such programmes ostensibly represent a large opportunity for youth labour market integration. Thus, policy-makers should be particularly eager to reach youth who are the most disadvantaged, enhancing their work prospects through access to post-compulsory education generally, and through dual-VET in particular.

The article is structured as follows: the next section presents some background information as well as the research approach to the studied programme, followed by the presentation of the theoretical lens. Against this backdrop, the mechanisms leading to the Matthew effect identified in the studied programme are supported by empirical findings. This is followed by the conclusion.

Background and research approach

The aim of this article is to study the mechanisms and reasons engendering a Matthew effect in a holistic manner. The article employs an in-depth, empirical approach drawing on a single, embedded qualitative case study (Yin 2013, p. 50). As Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 235) states “[t]he advantage of the case study is that it can ‘close in’ on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice”. Within the single case study (the programme), the focus is placed on multiple units of analysis: the different groups of key actors, with a particular focus on frontline workers. Through a “backward mapping” approach, light is shed on the process that leads to a Matthew effect, by closely looking at the behaviour of key actors against the backdrop of the incentives derived from their work contexts. As the core issue is the location of a Matthew effect, the focus of this research is placed on the moment just prior to access to the studied programme.

Background

Switzerland is a federalist state composed of cantons and whose constitution guarantees citizens a right to social assistance. This is, however, of cantonal competence, so implementation varies accordingly (Bundesrat, 2015; Tabin and Perriard, 2016, p. 3). The high degree of decentralization and local discretion leads to differences in cantonal social assistance schemes and programmes (such as the studied programme). Young adults (aged 18–25) and low-skilled individuals (lacking post-compulsory education) are particularly overrepresented among social assistance beneficiaries (Bundesrat, 2015, p. 5). Young adults without post-compulsory education are therefore particularly at risk. In Switzerland, youth labour market insertion difficulties can be traced to the 1990s. By the 2000s, “youth in difficulty” became a specific category of concern (Reynaud and Acklin, 2013, pp. 27–28), although youth unemployment remains low in comparative terms.

Comparatively low youth unemployment rates are often related to the VET system. VET certificates are widely recognized and valued by employers in Switzerland, and represent a valuable asset for integration into the Swiss labour market. Unlike in other countries, VET is not a second rank educational option, but it is very popular in Switzerland: annually, two-thirds of youth choose this educational pathway, with most opting for the dual-track VET (SBFI, 2018, p. 4). However accessibility to the apprenticeship market may pose a problem, as the availability of apprenticeships is dependent on the economy: employers are free to decide to train whom they wish (Häfeli and Schellenberg, 2009; Sager, 2006). Since employers select apprentices freely, the access to the apprenticeship market involves competition. Thus, an inherent selection logic, largely based on market principles, underlies access to dual-VET.

Case description

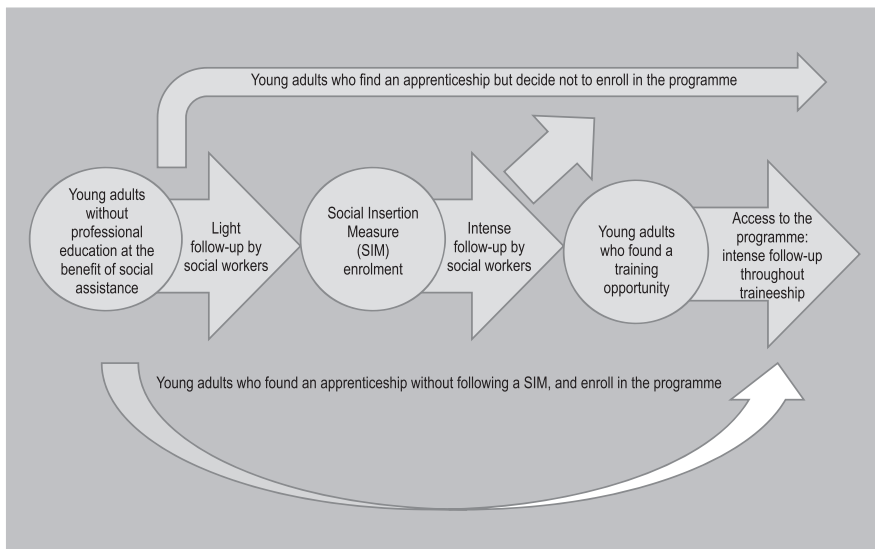
The studied canton has registered a steady increase of young adults (aged 18–25) filing for social assistance since the early 2000s. As nearly 70 per cent of applicants had not completed post-compulsory education, the canton launched the studied programme as a means of counteracting the problem. The programme targets those aged 18–25 who benefit from social assistance without having accomplished post-compulsory education. It aims to enhance their labour market opportunities by supporting their attainment of a VET certificate. Figure 1 illustrates the possible access pathways to the measure for youth.

To support youth throughout VET, the programme offers individualized, flexible coaching, and a scholarship covering training and living expenses. In

order to gain access to the programme, youth need to have found a training opportunity. As a means of support, the cantonal social affairs department is contracted with several external organizations offering social insertion measures (SIMs). In this way, social workers managing high workloads can refer youth to qualified professionals. This increases the probabilities of youth finding an apprenticeship and becoming eligible for the programme. SIMs are mainly private non-profit organizations that offer support in (re)gaining access to an apprenticeship or the labour market. These organizations vary in their focus: “high threshold” organizations focus on cognitive skills and job applications, while “low threshold” organizations additionally emphasize the need to acquire a “work-day rhythm”, develop soft-skills and self-confidence. However, these organizations all must respond to the same contractual conditions that demand the achievement of an annual success rate. Only a few SIMs, financially independent from the cantonal department, are not subject to such requirements.

The access criteria for the studied programme is predicated on having found a training opportunity. Accessing the selective dual-VET market is therefore a clear bottleneck to accessing the programme. Consequently, the notion of disadvantage considered in this article is relative to the apprenticeship market, and generally refers to the distance of youth from the apprenticeship market. The literature has highlighted several factors that contribute to influence the chances to access dual-VET systems. From an individual perspective, salient

Figure 1. Programme access pathways



Source: Author.

features are cognitive and soft-skills, compulsory education class-track,² socio-economic and migration background, nationality, informal networks, working virtues and gender (Camilleri-Cassar, 2013; Di Stasio, 2014; Häfeli and Schellenberg, 2009; Hupka and Stalder, 2004; Liebig, Kohls and Krause, 2012; Meyer, 2009; Perriard, 2005; Protsch and Solga, 2015; Solga, 2015). The notion of disadvantage, however, remains intentionally loose, to better adapt it to the local and empirical realities.

Case selection and data

The case has been selected for two main reasons. First, given that it targets many of the canton's most disadvantaged youth, the impact of the programme for successful candidates (those achieving a VET certificate) is presumed to be rather high. Politically, the programme is highly salient. The second reason stems from a presumed Matthew effect: despite a strong political emphasis on the programme, only about 15–20 per cent of eligible candidates gain access. Nonetheless, those youth who are enrolled achieve a global success rate of around 65 per cent,³ and about 80 per cent succeed in the final exam (close to the overall cantonal rate). Comparing the programme access rate with its success rate, and keeping in mind the general complexity of the target group, it was initially presumed that the less disadvantaged youth among the target group would primarily access the programme. This makes it an excellent case with which to explore the dynamics which lead to a Matthew effect.

The main data source is a corpus of 39 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 40 people, lasting approximately 30 to 90 minutes, and fully transcribed by the author. The analysis of the interview transcripts was performed using MAXQDA software, and draws on grounded theory in order to stay close to the empirical data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The interviewees represent a group of key actors, selected for their ability to influence the likelihood of youth accessing the programme. As in Table 1, they are clustered into three groups. The first group is composed of politico-administrative actors: at the cantonal level (top civil servants close to political powers, responsible for the policy design and steering) and at the municipal level (those responsible for the local management). The second group is composed of actors involved with the policy implementation, i.e. street-level bureaucrats such as social workers and contracted SIM workers. The potential policy recipients (i.e. target group youth

2. In differentiated education systems, pupils are divided into different tracks during lower-secondary education, with an impact on upper-secondary education options.

3. Youth who successfully complete the apprenticeship, going from one year to the next and ultimately receiving the certificate.

Table 1. *Interviewees by group of actors*

Group of actors	Interviewees (Citation code)	Number of interviews; Number of interviewees
Politico-administrative actors	Cantonal level (POLADMIN-CANT-I & II); Municipal level (POLADMIN-MUN-I & II)	3; 2 3; 2
Street-level bureaucrats	Social Workers (SLB-SW-I to X) SIM workers (SLB-SIM-I to XIV)	10 11; 14
Potential policy recipients	Target group youth enrolled in a SIM (YOUTH-I to X)	10 (including a 17 year old, ineligible for social assistance due to age requirements)
Others	Employee of the organization accompanying the youth enrolled in the programme (ADD-I) Municipal specialized insertion unit employee (ADD-II)	1 1
Total		39; 40

Source: Author.

enrolled in a SIM) compose the third group. Two additional interviewee accounts served as validation of the other interviewees' accounts. As a complement to the interviews, there was consultation of primary and secondary sources such as legal prescriptions, official reports and presentations on the programme, and previous studies concerning the programme.

Policies, actors and systems

According to Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 2010), the manner in which public policy reaches the population, affecting people's lives, is strongly influenced by how frontline workers transform policies into practice. To understand frontline practices, Lipsky's analytic framework emphasizes structural constraints and challenges stemming from frontline workers' working conditions (Brodkin, 2012, pp. 941–942). Consequently, to understand how public policies reach their target groups, it is crucial to focus on frontline worker job conditions, and imposed incentive structures. To better comprehend frontline practices in delivering activation policies, van Berkel et al. (2017) suggest taking into account the broader context in which frontline workers are embedded. They individuate four crucial contextual dimensions: policy, governance, organization, and occupation. The combination of Street Level Bureaucracy Theory with a focus on the broader contexts of activation policy delivery offers a particularly relevant theoretical lens for comprehending the occurrence of a Matthew effect in the studied programme.

Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs) are public workers characterized by working conditions that place them in direct and regular interaction with citizens, while enjoying a certain discretion in exercising authority and executing their job (Lipsky, 2010, p. 3). Despite working for private, non-profit organizations, SIM workers can also be considered SLBs, since they are contracted to perform activities on behalf of government agencies (Smith and Lipsky, 1993, p. 13). A major dilemma in public services is the perpetual scarcity of resources, since supply drives demand and not vice versa (Lipsky, 2010, p. 33–35) – a work structure that prevents SLBs from performing the job in its ideal conception. In order to translate this demand and supply impasse into a manageable workload, SLBs develop coping strategies and working regularities. One strategy is to re-categorize and differentiate “clients” in function of the likelihood of their administrative success, i.e. “cream-skimming” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 107).

The broader contexts in which frontline workers are embedded substantially affects the incentive structures they are subject to. The politico-administrative framework of the studied case seems generally affected by a context of budgetary constraints. Relative to the policy context, the scrutinized programme is an activation policy falling under the social investment category. Swiss activation policies, after having been expanded and reinforced in unemployment insurance policy in 1997 (Gerfing and Lechner, 2002, p. 854), have breached into social assistance policy more recently (Tabin and Perriard, 2016, p. 3). Thus, in Switzerland as elsewhere, activation policy reforms broadened the target groups to increasingly include persons facing “far more serious problems (in terms of health, social circumstances, debts, employability, etcetera) than the groups activation was traditionally aimed at” (Caswell et al., 2017, p. 185). Given that post-compulsory education is a valuable asset for the integration into modern knowledge economies, activation policies often emphasize human capital investment. Particularly, the social investment strategy emphasizes education and training as key instruments for labour market integration (Bonoli, 2013, pp. 17–19). In this vein, the studied programme aims to improve young social assistance beneficiaries’ chances on the labour market, through education and training investments.

With regard to governance, another driving contextual factor in this case study is the New Public Management (NPM) approach to public management. This approach pursues objectives such as improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the public sector, reducing public expenditures, and improving managerial accountability (Christensen and Lægreid, 2013, p. 1). Moreover, it emphasizes accountability for results, rather than process accountability, preferences contracting-out over in-house provision, multi-source over single-source suppliers, and fixed-term, over unlimited labour contracts. It also shifts towards “shorter-term and much more tightly specified contracts” (Boston, 2013, pp. 20–21).

Specific to Switzerland, this approach is thought of as outcome-oriented public management, as it “values the attainment of outcomes over and above the technical provision of outputs” (Schedler and Pröller, 2010, p. xiv). Outcome-focused management implies performance management, meaning “[o]utcome orientation must be reflected in the incentive system for staff” (Schedler and Pröller, 2010, p. 60). In the case of supervisors’ sovereignty, “outcome orientation frequently mutates into an excessively bureaucratic check on costs and outputs” (Schedler and Pröller, 2010, p. 231). The studied programme reflects characteristics of both approaches. Crucial activities are attributed to various contracted organizations, whose relationship to the public authorities is based on fixed, rather short-term contracts, and dependent on performance indicators. Moreover, many frontline workers mentioned the increased burden of time-consuming reporting. In the following, the more commonly known term, NPM will refer to this described governance context.

The influence of organizational and occupational factors are considered together in this analysis. Among the contracted organizations, “low-threshold” SIMs are accessible to the most-disadvantaged youth. In contrast, “high-threshold” SIMs are focused on the employability/trainability of “clients”, and thus clients are selected. Put differently, “low-threshold” SIMs seem intrinsically concerned with helping youth in difficulty. For two important reasons, it is on this group that this study’s interviews focused mainly. First, because the most-disadvantaged youth were not excluded by their selection criteria. Second, because their organizational goal (helping disadvantaged persons) presumably compels them to reach out to the most-disadvantaged “clients”. The occupational identity of those employed by such organizations ostensibly reflects these organizational goals.

Unveiling the Matthew effect

SIM workers immediately appeared to be crucial gatekeepers in terms of access to the studied programme. They work intensively with youth over a meaningful period of time (generally three to six months). The incentive structures for these frontline workers, affecting frontline practices, are particularly determined by the contextual elements of policy and governance. First, policy design presents challenges, as SIMs must insert somewhat disadvantaged youth into a selective apprenticeship market, while lacking the instruments to influence employers’ choices. Second, strict performance evaluation within a rather brief timeframe is demanding: contracts with public authorities are renewed annually, and are contingent on the fulfilment of a predetermined success rate. Success is clearly defined, and follows the lines of activation principles. Youth who have found a training opportunity (preferably), or another mid- to long-term solution (e.g. a long-lasting internship or job) are considered a success. Thus, in line with NPM,

SIMs are held accountable for clearly-defined results, regardless of the process leading to the success. Since most SIMs rely heavily or exclusively on this source of income, failing to renew the contract by not respecting these conditions would mean risking organizational survival. Additionally, the structural constraints of the selective dual-VET market remain unaffected by policy design, while the youth they accompany are rather distant from it. Thus, the more disadvantaged a young person is, the more difficult it is to be inserted into this market, and the higher the risk for SIMs to fail to achieve the required success rate. This results in an incentive structure compelling SIM workers to engage in cream-skimming practices, causing, in turn, a Matthew effect.

Cream-skimming of candidates is a coping strategy for frontline workers dealing with a chronic scarcity of resources (Lipsky, 2010, p. 107). It induces caseworkers to invest more resources in easier-to-place candidates, already closer to the market: the “cream”. Other studies analysing the implementation of ALMPs also highlighted cream-skimming practices (e.g. van Berkel, 2017; Bredgaard and Larsen, 2007; Koning and Heinrich, 2013). To comprehend this frontline practice against the backdrop of the incentive structure, the following sections discuss the different mechanisms in greater detail, supported by a selection of relevant citations from the empirical results.

Untreated structural challenges

Though eligibility to the programme relies on access to the dual-VET system, the policy design does not address the issue of market selectivity. Indeed, frontline workers do not receive any instrument capable of affecting employers’ candidate choices. Thus, the focus rests on adapting the demand for apprenticeship to its offer. Yet, the target group youth are generally rather removed from the apprenticeship market. Many of the obstacles to access dual-VET highlighted in the literature, such as lacking familial support (lack of network), migration background, low school-track, and weak academic and soft skills, were also mentioned by interviewees describing the accompanied youth. In addition to these features, many interviewees also stressed the necessity of a certain stability in order for youth to be able to engage in an apprenticeship. Yet, most youth face complex and unstable life situations, such as housing instability, debt, health issues, and addictions. Sometimes the complexity is so high as to temporarily cause vocational/occupational projects to become a secondary issue. The structural obstacles imposed by the dual-VET system make it therefore particularly challenging for many target group youth to get selected, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged. This is aptly illustrated by the following citations:

The objective is really that a youth is as ready as possible to start an apprenticeship. And of course it is also necessary to find the apprenticeship placement! And this is not easy huh, to get this place, it's really not easy! So it's really the best dossiers which get selected, and to become a good dossier, often there is a lot of work to be done So [the objective is] to turn such a dossier into a more attractive one – or, I would say, into a *normally* (speaker's emphasis) attractive one to an employer who may engage an apprentice, you see... (SLB-SW-II)

We would like to be able to place a maximum of youths, and then there is reality: we cannot put everyone. There are youths who start from so low, who face so many difficulties, that if possible it will be way later, maybe two-three years later it will be possible to imagine ... Because that youth will be in hell, it may be necessary to solve health issues, there might also be youths who maybe won't do an apprenticeship, ... a certified traineeship is clearly reserved, we cannot dream that everyone can access it. (POLADMIN-MUN-II)

According to me, we have rather few youths who are sufficiently ready to enter an apprenticeship. Ehm, there are substance abuse problems, psychological problems too, which means that some really take a long time to enter VET. (SLB-SW-IV)

Since employers generally try to select more trainable youth (Di Stasio, 2014), the chances of a target group member on the apprenticeship market are generally somewhat scant. Access criterion to the studied programme requires having already found a training opportunity. Thus, less-disadvantaged youth gain more access to the VET market, and to the programme as well. Put differently, structural challenges imposed by the selective apprenticeship system, which are not addressed in the policy design, lead to increased programme access for the less-disadvantaged youth.

Activating the most-disadvantaged: Administratively too risky

To improve youth chances on the apprenticeship market, the cantonal welfare department has contracted several organizations (SIMs) to work intensively with the youth to better equip them to access the dual-VET market. However, the conditions of contract renewal for these contracted organizations incentivizes cream-skimming practices. Cream-skimming is not in line with the organizational objectives of these non-profit organizations dedicated to support youth (re)integration into the apprenticeship market. Yet, the financial dependence on cantonal payments of most SIMs influences their behaviour. This

leads to subordinate the organizational mission to organizational survival goals. Smith and Lipsky (1993, p. 12) offer perspective on this organizational bind: “[w]hen public funds play so vital a role in private agency budgets, it is disingenuous to think that the non-profit sector would not be in danger of losing its separate identity”. Particularly interesting in this respect is the following citation from one of the few SIMs financially independent from the welfare department and, thus, not subject to its assessment criteria:

what might also be interesting is that in our measure, we will not be ... how to say, measured on results with a percentage of success, so, eehm, we have pretty low-threshold youths: we do not select the good risks ... (SLB-SIM-XIV)

To ensure contract renewal, SIMs must meet a certain annual success rate, an assessment method that leads to cream-skimming for two main reasons. First, the timeframe is relatively tight. Access to the apprenticeship market is not readily available for most of these youth, and as Gomel, Issehnane and Legendre (2013) demonstrate, youth most removed from the market need a more intense follow-up in order to access it. Yet, in the present case, the individual distance to the market is not acknowledged by assessment criteria. Indeed, both low- and high-threshold SIMs are assessed in the same way. Consequently, SLBs do not dispose of the resources necessary to address those with the greatest needs. Given that SIM workers’ means of altering the structural challenges are extremely limited, their actions are mostly confined to work on the candidate profiles. Given the complexity of each individual’s situation, enabling access to the apprenticeship market is frequently a time-consuming process (e.g. life situation stabilization, catch-up lacunas, regaining motivation and self-esteem). To empower the most disadvantaged youth, one year is often a tight timeframe, as confirmed by an interviewed social worker:

This takes time, yes it takes time. Whereas in the programme it should go fast so that they leave social assistance. But I have rarely seen that it goes fast actually, for one reason or another, it is rare that it goes quickly, because if it would go fast, they wouldn’t be on social assistance. ... so, ehm, by definition, according to me, it won’t go fast. (SLB-SW-V)

The second reason that yearly assessment leads to cream-skimming is that success rates are evaluated in terms of activation. Considering the general distance of these youths from the apprenticeship market, more focus on those closer to the market is a safer bet for SIMs concerned with success rates. Tellingly, an increase of the demanded success rate from 20 per cent to 50 per cent accentuated cream-skimming practices, as highlighted by a SIM worker:

However, there is also cream-skimming. We... hmmm... it is difficult to say... we try to avoid it on a day-to-day basis, but it is clear that for instance today we will more rapidly say “currently it is not yet possible [to insert this youth], this leads nowhere”. Whereas actually before, when we were still at 20 per cent [success rate] we could take more time to accompany the youth to see if there was still a change that could be made and so on. But here we are now, *constrained* (speaker’s emphasis), yes, it is clear, actually we say more quickly “well, there, pfff, it... it won’t happen”. (SLB-SIM-XI)

To counteract the lack of formal instruments available to influence employer decisions, some SIMs manage to have good relationships with firms mainly concerning internships. Such relationships are a precious tool, as internships can lead to an offer of an apprenticeship. At the same time, they are extremely resource intensive for SIMs to develop and maintain. Thus, SIMs are highly concerned with preserving them, and tend to avoid referring youth who may represent a potential “threat” to these relationships. The most disadvantaged will therefore receive less access to this resource:

We support the youths because we understand their problems, but [when they undertake an internship] it is their job also to perform well, to prove to be trustworthy and then ... it is important, they don’t allow themselves to be absent just like that ... an employer expects the youth to be active and motivated! – Int.: So for you it is important, in order to keep employers’ trust or collaboration, that the youths are trustworthy... – Exactly! By the way, we just lost a ... this is what is difficult for us, it’s that sometimes the youths didn’t go or there were issues, and so we lost the link [to the employer], yes. Recently it happened to us and it is quite difficult already to get this link and then all the sudden hopp! So sometimes we have to choose, according to the type of firm, which youth we place, well, choose ... is a big word, but to pay attention in order to preserve our contact. (SLB-SIM X)

Int.: I imagine it is also important for you to maintain a good relationship with the firms, so as to propose the “right” youths to them? – Of course, we do part of the recruiting job for them, by filtering these youths! (SLB-SIM-VI)

It appears therefore that cream-skimming incentives for SIM workers are varied and strong. For the majority of these organizations, public financing is vital, so reaching out to the most disadvantaged target group youth is too risky. Instead, by focusing on the least disadvantaged, the probability of attaining the required success rate within the strict timeframe is increased. Cream-skimming

is therefore a coping strategy for SIM workers, allowing them to ensure organizational survival. However, this leads to a Matthew effect.

Activating the most-disadvantaged: Politically too costly

The interaction between the contexts of policy and governance results in an incentive structure that compels SIMs to cream-skim candidates, inducing a Matthew effect. During a research presentation on the programme,⁴ a key politico-administrative actor openly stated that cream-skimming of potential programme participants is an endorsed objective. In another interview, an actor in the same field stated:

The preparatory measures [SIMs] are evaluated according to results. Not according to how the job is done, but according to the results achieved, and this for me is very important. Because I want there to be a filter. I prefer that the youth are reoriented towards more adequate measures, instead of staying here and failing time after time. This isn't good. (POLADMIN-CANT-I)

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According to Lipsky (2010, p. 37–38), prioritization of service quality would entail such high costs as to be politically not feasible, with cost-benefit ratios being regarded as unacceptable. Plausibly, to reach out to the most disadvantaged in the given politico-governance and cost-containment context would also entail politically unacceptable costs, as it would presumably lower the success rate. Indeed, good results are not only desirable for the political returns of the policy proponents of this highly politicized flagship policy, they are also necessary to ensure the essential political consensus. This broad political consensus, which allowed for considerable financial means to be allocated to the development of the programme over the years, is strictly relative to its good results. The initial support was gained through sound results in a pilot project:

The political context was favourable thanks to the obtained results, because at the beginning it wasn't so favourable, it was like a bet at the beginning, because it was thought that these 3–4 per cent of youth who represented the share of this cohort of youths, aged 18–25 receiving social assistance, were either very marginalized or youth who profited from public help to pay for their holidays. ... [Stereotypes] really well anchored, to the Right as well as to the Left in my opinion. Then, *thanks to these successes* [of the pilot project], *the Right as well as the Left applauded the results of this programme* and since then there has been a high degree of

4. The presentation took place at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, on 2 February 2017.

uniformity concerning how the results and the success of this programme are interpreted, which then didn't pose any further problems at the political level. *It appeared really as an investment.* (emphasis added) (POLADMIN-CANT-I)

Positive results are therefore key for political support, and this support is fundamental for budgetary allocation. If results decline, political and, thus, financial support would most likely collapse. Conforming to the policy context, results are evaluated through activation and, particularly, through the lens of social investment. The youth who manage training are the ones who contribute to the increased success rates. The most disadvantaged among the target group face a higher risk of apprenticeship interruption. This would trigger lower success rates, disrupt the political consensus, and translate into budgetary cuts. Therefore, by filtering the strongest candidates at the entrance to the programme, this increases the probability of attaining the necessary good results. The following citations illustrate this well:

I think that the force of this programme is that we don't enrol someone who we know will fail. (POLADMIN-MUN-II)

... I think that [the criteria to access the programme] is really for all those who are capable to follow and have the potential. This is why we often say that it is a bit like the cream of our clients who we send to the programme. Well, it is for all those for whom the problems are not an obstacle to enter it or to continue with it. (POLADMIN-MUN-I)

Against the backdrop of the requirements stemming from the policy and governance contexts, it is therefore crucial for politico-administrative actors that the allocated means appear as investments. Reaching out to the most disadvantaged among the target group would lead to less certain results, in terms of candidates successfully managing the apprenticeship. These fuzzier returns on investments would plausibly undermine and eventually collapse the broad political support. Consequently, reaching out to the most disadvantaged might seem politically too costly for the relevant actors.

Conclusion

In this article, the aim has been to understand the mechanisms and reasons leading to a Matthew effect through a single embedded case study of a training programme for disadvantaged youth in Switzerland. To understand why the most-disadvantaged youth face substantial difficulties in accessing the programme, the focus was placed on frontline workers (Lipsky, 2010). To better understand

these frontline practices, the broader setting has been taken into account (van Berkel et al., 2017). The cost containment-driven policy and governance context is particularly relevant for the present study: these two contextual dimensions significantly shape the incentive structure, which compels caseworkers to practice cream-skimming, eventually triggering a Matthew effect.

In terms of policy, eligibility criteria and politically untreated structural challenges of the selective apprenticeship market pose a primary obstacle to programme access for the most-disadvantaged youth. In terms of governance, stringent performance management within a challenging timeframe further pushes frontline workers towards cream-skimming practices. In these scenarios, it seems that activation of the most disadvantaged youth is administratively too risky, and politically too costly. Indeed, for frontline workers obligated to comply with performance exigencies in a relatively short timeframe, it is too risky to reach out to the most disadvantaged youth, those most removed from the selective apprenticeship market. These individuals lower the probability of reaching the demanded success rate necessary for contract renewal, which places the survival of the organization at risk. Thus, SIMs cope with their working conditions by cream-skimming candidates, placing organizational survival over organizational goals. Similarly, politico-administrative actors must comply with efficiency and discipline in resource use to minimize the risk of losing the programme-sustaining political consensus. This makes it too costly to reach out to the most disadvantaged, who might not deliver the politically necessary clear-cut and solid success rate within a short timeframe.

In this case study, a Matthew effect finds its sources in structural obstacles, as well as in an incentive structure that drives SLBs to cream-skim candidates. This incentive structure is a political strategy that safeguards the political consensus necessary for the programme budget allocations. Indeed, this case study shows that a politico-administrative framework combining activation policies with a NPM approach, without confronting structural obstacles, leads to a restrictive politico-administrative logic, making it particularly hard to reach out to the most disadvantaged. While activation policies focus on the activation of target groups, NPM stresses efficient resource use and accountability for results, relying on performance management. As long as the structure remains selective, this combination seemingly incentivizes frontline workers to focus more on easier-to-place individuals among a target group, engendering a Matthew effect. In other words, when working with disadvantaged individuals to access selective markets, the focus on quick and solid results does not allow frontline workers to reach out to the most disadvantaged. Ultimately, the Matthew effect appears to result from a political compromise: to invest in a highly disadvantaged group despite a cost-containment context, yet sacrificing the most disadvantaged among them in order to keep costs politically acceptable. This

research shows that in-depth case studies are valuable to gain a deeper understanding of street-level behaviour and highlight relevant mechanisms and consequences. Therefore, such studies offer a significant contribution to inform policy-makers in their decision taking procedures.

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Organizational governance of activation policy: Transparency as an organizational ideal in a Swedish welfare agency

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Abstract The Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan* – SSIA) and its frontline staff have a key role in the implementation of activation policy. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted at local offices, this article investigates how the transparency ideal, as an integral part of the organizational governance of the activation policy, is negotiated and enacted in the everyday life of a welfare bureaucracy. The analysis shows the central role that the transparency ideal plays in the alignment of frontline staff with the normative regime of the agency. While the transparency ideal is central to the internal organizational life of the SSIA, the analysis shows how transparency is much less salient in relation to clients and other relations with the outside world.

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Keywords return to work, cash sickness benefit, rehabilitation, social security administration, Sweden

Introduction

The audit culture has penetrated the public sector in many countries in the Western world (Power, 1997), where the ideal of transparency is a key component to enable the inspection and follow-up of activities and performances (e.g. Strathern, 2000; Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2008; Albu and Flyverbom, 2016). Transparency is a fundamental condition for all organizations that permits to live up to expectations about accountability and legitimacy in relation to their surroundings. However, transparency is particularly critical for public authorities, as they must not only live up to organizational efficiency and goal-attainment but also follow the rule of law and requirements on equal treatment. As Flyverbom (2015) has noted, despite the widespread belief in transparency as an organizational ideal, we know relatively little about how transparency is practiced in various specific contexts. Meanwhile, organizational governance (with its inherent focus on audit and transparency) must be understood in relation to the goals the organization is expected to achieve. In a Swedish sickness insurance policy context, there has been a strong focus on reducing the number of people receiving sick leave benefits. In line with this development, strong requirements on activation have been implemented in the sickness insurance programme.

In the implementation of this activation policy, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan* – SSIA), one of the the largest welfare bureaucracies in Sweden, and its frontline staff have a key role. This article investigates how the transparency ideal, as an integral part of the organizational governance of activation policy, is negotiated and enacted in the everyday life of a welfare bureaucracy, the SSIA. The focus is placed on how the organizational ideal of transparency, as an inherent component of audit culture and key in the organizational mediation of activation policy, plays out in everyday practice in this agency. To achieve this end, we take a wide view of governance, investigating the role that transparency plays at frontline level in terms of the organizational culture and management practices, spatial-temporal governance, the organization of teamwork and case-management, along with performance targets and follow-up practices.

Previous research and positioning of the study

The audit culture has penetrated the public sector in many countries in the past decades as part and parcel of New Public Management (NPM), such as

management by objectives and performance. This also pertains to Sweden (e.g. Hasselbladh et al., 2008; Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016). With this type of governance, organizations tend to become preoccupied with performance management in two ways: first, with how to manage the organization to achieve the targets, goals, standards, or elements of performance that are expected or demanded; and second, with how to manage the presentation of the organization's performance in ways that testify to its achievements and effectiveness (e.g. Power, 1997; Shore and Wright, 1999; Strathern, 2000; Hood and Heald, 2006; Clarke, 2005). Technologies of transparency are, in this context, key to achieving visibility and, thus, accountability (e.g. Strathern 2000). The quest for transparency and performance display has led Ball (2003) to speak of a "performativity culture" that characterizes the daily work in the public sector; the productive worker is an entrepreneurial self who strives to excel in organizational attainment.

The audit culture, including transparency norms, has proved to have huge implications for welfare bureaucracies and casework (e.g. Lauri, 2016). A key aspect of audit logic is a strong belief in standardization and achieving comparability and control. Consequently, studies have found increased standardization of client assessments (Bejerot and Hasselbladh, 2011; Caswell, Marston and Elm Larsen, 2010; Bovens and Zouridis, 2002; White, Hall and Peckover, 2009; Brodtkin and Larsen, 2013). Concern with formal accountability readily replaces professional judgment. This has been discussed as organizational professionalism replacing occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2011), or as the emergence of "professionals without profession" (van Berkel, van der Aa and van Gestel, 2010). Others have preferred to speak of "deprofessionalization" (Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016). In their studies of the SSIA, Hetzler (2009) and Björnberg (2012) have consequently found increased standardization of work capacity assessment in which medical certificates from medical doctors are increasingly questioned and disqualified. SSIA caseworkers who work with sickness insurance become primarily "rational programme administrators" (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012) testing benefit eligibility in standardized ways and according to the agency's own system logic.

However, studies have found that frontline staff have defended discretionary power and professional values also under NPM (e.g. Evans, 2011; Brodtkin, 2011; Evetts, 2011; Jessen and Tufte, 2014). Nevertheless, thus far, most of these studies have focused on social work (which typically is characterized by a strong professional culture) rather than state agencies, such as the Public Employment Service (see however Lindvert, 2006; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2016), and the SSIA where caseworkers lack a common educational and professional identity.

Our analysis underscores the role that transparency plays in forming a distinct organizational culture and normativity at SSIA, and in particular the role of "horizontal transparency". Interestingly, horizontal transparency has not been given much attention in previous research. In an often-quoted typology, Heald (2006)

distinguishes between “upwards and downwards transparency” and “inwards and outwards transparency” in organizations. We suggest that it is by horizontal, social governance – in teams and in the informal interactions and negotiations between caseworkers – that transparency, as a way to align staff with the normative regime of the agency, gets its social power and becomes performative.

In a research overview, Albu and Flyverbom (2016) distinguish between studies that see transparency as an informational matter (about visibilizing information) and studies that see transparency as something more fundamental, ordering social relationships in organizations. The former approach they label a “verification approach” and the latter a “performativity approach”. That transparency is performative means that it accomplishes things, for instance, produces social relationships and/or a normativity that mobilizes actors in a particular way (Albu and Flyverbom, 2016, p. 10). This article presents such a study. The performativity approach entails seeing transparency as a social process that involves subjects implementing transparency, socio-material transparency practices, and a concrete socio-spatial context where the transparency ideal is put into practice (Albu and Flyverbom, 2016).

Method and data

We draw inspiration from institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), which has a point of departure in people’s everyday experiences. The aim is to understand the institutions and institutional relations in which caseworkers are embedded. The focus is on real persons and their actual activities in order to grasp how they are coordinated, that is their social organization (Smith, 2005 p. 70). We, thus, investigate the role that the transparency ideal plays in the coordination of actions in the SSIA.

The analysis is based primarily on ethnographic observations of the daily work in five local SSIA offices located in two Swedish regions. We observed team meetings, staff training, leadership/management training, co-worker meetings, quality control, as well as interaction in lunch rooms. We also “shadowed” individual caseworkers in their daily work (excluding direct client interaction for confidentiality reasons). In addition, the analysis draws on 38 interviews with staff in those local offices: caseworkers administering sickness insurance, their local managers, as well as local specialists in medical insurance. The empirical data was gathered in offices that complied with (or exceeded) the organizational goals in relation to granted sickness benefits. This was the case in four out of the five offices.

Seventeen interviews were conducted at the head office in Stockholm and one group interview was conducted with higher officials at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to obtain background information on organizational governance in the SSIA. We also draw on organizational documents obtained from the SSIA website. Data collection took place during 2015–2017.

Background: Activation policies and the Swedish Social Insurance Agency

As mentioned, organizational governance and control must be understood in relation to the goals the organization is expected to achieve. A critical task of sickness insurance policy in most Western welfare states in recent decades has been to reduce the economic burden on society due to sick leave. This is to be done by stimulating and enforcing labour market participation. Activation policies have gained strong support, and activities that prevent the “benefit-trap” are favoured by international organizations (see for example, OECD, 2010) as well as national governments (Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl, 2008; Lødemel and Trickey, 2001). Policies focus on “early return to work”, as work is generally considered to be good for health and wellbeing (e.g. Seing, 2014).

In line with general policy orientation, Swedish sickness insurance has become more restrictive; eligibility criteria have been restrained, and the possibilities of being granted a permanent disability pension have been limited. Since the early 2000s, the so-called “work strategy” has been strengthened with demands on an early return to work or otherwise readjustment to a new job in the labour market (Björnberg, 2012; Hetzler, 2009; Seing, 2014). In the context of activation policies, various attempts to steer and control the administration of sickness insurance have been introduced. During the last two decades, the SSIA has undergone several organizational changes and has initiated extensive internal “development work” (e.g. ISF, 2016). In 2008, the centre-right government (in office at the time) introduced the “rehabilitation chain”, which is a legislated working method that caseworkers are required to apply. This working method consists of a fixed time schedule for assessing individuals’ work ability and right to sickness benefits. A controversial element of this reform (which was given much attention in public debate and media) was the introduction of a time limit on the length of benefits (regardless if the person had recovered from illness or not). Initially, this time limit was set to 365 days, and, later, it was extended up to 915 days, depending on the severity and prognosis of the health condition.

In response to public criticism of the agency, in 2011, the centre-right government commissioned the SSIA to increase citizens’ trust in social insurance and the agency. Extensive internal organizational development work was initiated with the aim to move away from the detailed steering of caseworkers. Under the influence of Lean,¹ the SSIA introduced teamwork in 2012 where caseworkers were organized into self-managed teams with a joint mission and

1. Lean is a management model based on Toyota’s production system, which in recent years has spread to the public sector in Sweden and in other countries. Lean aims to make the work process more effective and reduce “unnecessary” activities and resources (Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990).

the responsibility to plan and manage their own production (Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). A key element of this teamwork (and Lean) at SSIA is visual governance where goals, results, and work performance of the caseworkers are visualized for all team members as well as management. Visualization is expected to contribute to feedback on caseworkers' work performance, which is aimed to make the work process more efficient.

In 2016, the controversial end point in Swedish sickness insurance was abolished by the centre-left government (that took office in 2014), but the overall orientation toward activation was maintained. In 2016, the centre-left government introduced a numerical target for the sickness absence rate in Sweden; it was stated that "the sickness benefit rate may not exceed 9.0 days per individual and per year in 2020". Further, it was stressed that the number of newly granted disability pensions "shall not exceed 18,000 per year during the period 2016–2020" (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2016).

In 2015, a new Director-General was appointed, and since 2016–2017 a shift (and return) to stricter management by objectives and results within the agency has been apparent. The SSIA must, to a greater extent, contribute to reducing the Swedish sickness absence rate by making sick leave periods fewer and shorter (ISF, 2016). There is an emphasis on creating increased "quality" in the handling of sick-leave cases by the correct application of the law, which ensures rule of law principles. The caseworkers are prompted to "make things right from the start" in case management and "increase the quality of the investigations" to ensure that "the right person receives the right compensation" (SSIA, 2016, p. 2).

The SSIA has about 14,000 employees, and it is responsible for administrating the public social insurance system – in other words, it is responsible for administering sickness insurance for the Swedish population; e.g. insurance and benefits to families with children and to people with disabilities and illnesses. The focus in this study is solely on the administration of sickness insurance (with around 4,000 employees), divided into 55 local insurance offices. "Support functions" such as insurance medical advisers (doctors) and insurance experts also work in the local offices where caseworkers handle sick leave cases.

The caseworkers are formally responsible for decisions regarding individuals' right to sickness benefits, for setting up a rehabilitation plan, and for cooperating with other stakeholders, such as health care, employers, and the Public Employment Service. Caseworkers' assessments of individuals' right to sickness benefits are based on sickness certificates issued by physicians.

The cases are registered in an electronic case management system, known as ÄHS. The caseworkers' documentation and journal entries, as well as incoming and outgoing communications, are recorded in the system. When a new document, such as a medical certificate, comes to the agency, it is scanned centrally and then is made visible to the caseworker. The cases that come to the

team are distributed among the staff, and a personal caseworker is appointed. The personal caseworker investigates and makes decisions on the case based on the guidelines and administrative support established by the SSIA head office. An investigation and the resulting decision-making can formally be understood as a formal and highly regulated process where only the personal caseworker (and if necessary also superiors) has insight into and the possibility to influence the case. As we will see, however, in practice, the case management process is characterized by collective negotiation processes in which the ideal of transparency is at work in various ways.

Analysis: Transparency in the everyday life of caseworkers – External closure versus internal openness

Non-transparent practices and external self-containment

Transparency cannot be understood solely in terms of what is made visible, but also what is made invisible and hidden in the organization in question (Garsten and Montoya, 2008). The starting point of the analysis is, thus, what is made invisible by the SSIA, especially in relation to the outside world; the agency's external environment. This self-containment in relation to the outside world stands in sharp contrast to the ideals of internal openness and transparency within the organization.

External self-containment is manifested in the tools for communication with citizens as well as the limited physical contact between caseworkers and clients. The SSIA web page is a main strategy for communication with and providing information to citizens. Information about the services available can be found on the web page, and clients can also register their case by logging on to personal accounts. In many ways, the web page is the most noticeable facade of the organization to the outside world, and the SSIA works in a strategic way to direct clients to digital solutions on the web page when they look for information and are in need of services. Rules and regulations, application forms, general information on the areas of responsibility of the agency, can be found on the web page. However, only selected parts of the organization are made visible through the web page. Information about the inner life of the agency remains, to a large extent, hidden. For instance, there is no information about the location of local offices, no information on or contact details about local management or caseworkers, and no direct phone numbers or email addresses are available to the public. The central aspects of work within the agency, such as rules and regulations in relation to casework, professional support documents available for caseworkers in their work, areas for caseworker specialization, remain hidden

from the public eye. Thus, the internal life behind the web page and the SSIA's well-known logotype remain hidden from citizens; transparency ideals do not reach into this area.

Self-containment in relation to the external environment is also evident in relation to the caseworkers' contacts with clients as well as other agencies. Caseworkers have their workplace in offices behind locked doors, in areas to which only SSIA employees have access. No client meetings take place in the work area. Communication with clients does not primarily take place face-to-face, but through letters, emails, and phone conversations. Decisions concerning clients are communicated by written correspondence, and clients' responses to these are normally communicated to caseworkers via phone or email rather than face-to-face. Only where there is an evident need for coordinated interventions between the employer, health care authorities, and the person on sick leave, do face-to-face meetings become a part of regular casework. These meetings take place outside the SSIA offices, at health care centres, the work place of the sick-listed person, or in small meeting rooms to which the SSIA and other state agencies have access. Working practices such as these mean that clients' reactions are mediated by technology, and caseworkers do not have to be confronted directly with the clients, their personal reactions or life situations.

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Clients' knowledge of the caseworkers is often restricted to only the name, and clients can contact their caseworkers through a personal email address and direct number. Apart from this information, the caseworker remains invisible to the client. From the caseworker perspective, clients are also hidden or made invisible in regular casework. The caseworker has substantial knowledge about the health of their clients. Caseworkers read medical certificates, and based on the information from the medical doctor, an assessment of the work ability of the client – and thereby eligibility for sickness benefits – is made. Apart from this, the caseworkers have limited knowledge about other aspects of the clients' lives. As long as caseworkers operate under the logic that the assessment of the sickness benefit, the rule of law, and legal aspects of the process are the prime areas of focus, this does not per se constitute a problem for caseworkers or managers. Instead, the anonymizing of clients is praised. This “invisibilization” or anonymization of clients and caseworkers in SSIA is an important aspect for understanding the governance of the caseworkers, their perception of their work, and the demands placed on them in their work. Thus, relationships between clients and caseworkers take place under very different circumstances – that is with restricted face-to-face meetings – than in most other human service organizations (Hasenfeld, 2010).

Contact between caseworkers and citizens is mediated by physical as well as technological barriers. Consistent transparency ideals in state agencies are, therefore, a challenge; in this context, we see an organization that, by different

means, closes itself in relation to the outside world – with clear boundaries between the inner life of the agency and the environment in which the agency operates. There are, of course, various rationalities behind the policy and practice of locked doors within the SSIA, such as staff security and protection of personal data. Nevertheless, the perspective of this article is on external self-containment as not only a background but also a contrast to the organizational ideals of transparency that otherwise penetrate and constitute the everyday life of SSIA caseworkers.

Horizontal transparency in casework

One area where the organizational transparency ideal is evident is in relation to routines and regulations that surround direct casework. All caseworkers belong to a team consisting of about eight to ten staff. A unit manager is responsible for several teams. One of the bearing principles of the team is the obligation to provide cover for one another. All caseworkers in a team can access each other's cases and are given the authority to work and perform necessary tasks in the case. This means that team members have direct access to all decisions, communications, and documentation made by a caseworker in the cases, and team members take a collective responsibility for, or collective ownership of, the cases within a team. Making the casework transparent within the team is a central aspect of the casework and an important tool for reaching the goals set by the agency centrally. These procedures are coherent with organizational goals, such as keeping the casework in line with the time limits set for Swedish sickness insurance and making sure transfers of cash benefits are made in the correct manner and at the right time.

Another way of achieving internal transparency is through regular team meetings where cases are discussed. Meetings are scheduled on a weekly basis, and caseworkers bring cases they find complicated, and colleagues can give their input. Sickness insurance specialists and insurance medical advisors take part in the meetings on a regular basis. The cases are anonymized in these discussions. Through technical equipment, the medical certificate issued by the treating doctor is visualized on a black board. All members of the team can read the content, and the focus of the discussion is centred on the work ability and the benefit eligibility of the client based on this medical certificate.

The formal purpose of the team meetings is to support the caseworkers in difficult decisions regarding an individual's entitlement to sickness benefits. However, this way of practicing horizontal transparency also creates a normative and self-correcting practice enforced by peer pressure. In this practice, overtly divergent decision-making is reduced through negotiation amongst team

members. The role of the team members in supporting their colleagues in complex cases can, thus, be understood as a practice of peer pressure, where caseworkers' discretion is restricted through strong norms and discourses of collegial and organizational learning as well as shared responsibility for the outcomes of the team. When individual cases are discussed in the teams, the discussions, in fact, take the form of negotiations in which caseworkers and specialists give their input. The institutionalized routines for visualization make the casework transparent internally, which in turn becomes an important aspect of the governance of the caseworker. There is collegial pressure on the caseworker not to be too generous in the application of the insurance or to take personal circumstances too much into account.

Apart from the scheduled team meetings, caseworkers discuss their cases with each other on an informal basis during the workday; they regularly consult their colleagues ad hoc on issues they feel they need help with. Caseworkers not only use each other on issues related to clients' work ability but also in relation to changes in formal routines and regulations that affect the work of the caseworker.

This means that, in spite of the fact that casework is formally articulated as a highly independent task where caseworkers act according to their own discretion in line with rules and regulations governing sickness insurance, the actual casework is characterized by extensive openness, transparency and negotiation within teams. This horizontal transparency, where team meetings and informal discussions influence the casework, is in sharp contrast to the formal transparency outlined in routines and guidelines within the agency. According to these, casework is to be made transparent to clients. We argue that the consequences of the internal transparency, as lived and performed by the caseworkers in their everyday lives, challenge the notion of formal transparency, thus, making it more difficult for clients to gain insight into their own cases and how they are processed (see also Saarju, Rasanen and Hall, 2017).

Vertical transparency and audit

For our analysis, horizontal transparency derives its power through its interplay with vertical transparency; transparency in relation to management and specialists is an important part of governance and quality assessment within sickness insurance. Whereas specialists audit/control the casework in relation to current legislation and formal regulations, first-line management focuses on team and caseworker performance in relation to outcome (e.g. numbers of rejected/approved applications).

Quality assessments are an important task for specialists. The specialists have direct access to all cases in the computer system and can access any electronic file they wish without the knowledge of or having received authorization from the management or caseworker. These assessments are made on a regular basis, and the cases are assessed based on a number of different criteria. For instance, a specialist reviews all cases in which a caseworker suggests a rejection of benefits before the rejection is communicated to the client. Apart from this, selected cases are scrutinized according to criteria formulated at a central level in the agency. This means that all caseworkers are assessed according to the same procedures. For instance, caseworkers are assessed for the way they communicate with clients and meet the standards set by the organization. This is to ensure that documentation is produced according to norms and standards and that decisions are made on the correct premises (e.g. based on sufficient information). A few cases from each caseworker are randomly selected by a specialist, and the caseworker in question does not know in advance which cases will be subject to quality control/assessment by the specialist. The areas in focus are marked as either weaknesses or strengths, depending on whether the specialist considers improvements necessary or not. The results for each case are presented individually to caseworkers, and this is followed by discussions between the caseworker, specialist and first-line management. One specialist described the discussions:

You can take out a diagram for each individual caseworker to see how things look. If the diagram shows mainly green, then you know you have done well. But if you have orange, it means you have areas that need to be developed. And then we discuss this with the caseworker together with the manager. We usually take an hour or so to go through the cases we have been looking into. And tell them what we see, and then we reflect on the outcome.

The frequent control of the casework documented in the files was described by both caseworkers and management as an important part of the “learning processes” in the organization. The procedures surrounding this audit were described as a tool to enhance dialogue between co-workers and to provide feedback to individual caseworkers and teams on their work. Despite the fact that caseworkers also described insecurity and anxiety when their cases were exposed to specialists and management, they also described a feeling of comfort and satisfaction; the audit was seen as confirmation that they were “doing the right thing” in “the right way”. Feedback was described as an important part of a “coaching management strategy”; feedback was explicitly understood as a “gift” from one person to another. Critique as a gift was seen as having the potential to improve the work, not primarily constituting a reprimand. One caseworker described her feelings:

You can feel controlled and scrutinized, that this may imply criticism, but it is also an important part of [professional] development, to learn how to achieve betterment.

The managers assess and control the work performance of caseworkers in terms of production. Their focus is, for instance, on the percentage of cases handled within the different time limits of the rehabilitation chain, communications made to clients, and the relation between rejections and approvals of claims for sickness insurance benefits. Each caseworker registers all activities done in a specific case in a software programme, which makes extensive statistical analysis of production possible, from the individual caseworker progressively up to the team, office, regional and national levels.

The statistical data is processed by management and is presented at office level, and first-line managers also present data at team level and in some cases at individual caseworker level. In most cases, managers take the initiatives to send the data to the team coordinator, who in turn gives the information to the team members. However, it is not uncommon that teams ask managers for recent data, visualized in spreadsheet files and diagrams, to see how they perform. One manager described the value of audit and the visualization of production in the following way:

We used to have goals like this; make 75 per cent of such and such [decisions] within 180 days. ... And now, we have gone in another direction. ... now, we look at numbers in a different way. We look for deviances. We do not really care if the number is 68, or 83 per cent. It is rather those who end up in the trenches – those who do not follow the general pattern.

The quote shows how vertical transparency is an essential aspect of audit and control within the organization. The audit becomes normative and self-correcting as teams and caseworkers do not want to stand out as “deviant” or as those who “end up in the trenches”. Vertical and horizontal transparency become mutually supportive. Each caseworker is expected to be in line, or coherent, with the work of the rest of the team. With the ambition to mainstream casework in line with a strong discourse on the principles of the rule of law and the 9.0 sick days on annual average, individual (and team) deviations from the mainstream are to be reduced through highlighting and visualizing outcomes based on the statistical analysis. Caseworkers are expected to stay within the “normal” outcomes of the team, that is, not to show a larger percentage of rejections or approvals of claimed sickness benefits than anyone else. The measurement work done by specialists and managers is, thus, visualized in various ways for the office, team, and caseworker levels. Visualization of results is seen as a fundamental part of the continual quality work in relation to

case management. Visual governance is in itself an expression of the transparency ideal manifested in the agency.

Transparency in relation to performance (that of caseworkers, teams and offices) is a tool used to achieve internal and external accountability. On the one hand, transparency is used as a way to demonstrate to the environment – the head office, the board of the agency, the General-Director, and the public – that the agency is working in line with the mission of the agency, and that staff are working in the prescribed way. On the other hand, transparency also serves an important purpose for the employees in the local offices. Transparency makes it possible for them to know that they are doing the right thing. The audit culture is, thus, not only part of a culture of distrust, serving as a technology of mistrust (Power, 1997); it is also a technology of ontological safety (Giddens, 1991), for the caseworkers and their superiors, providing them with a sense of security and a feeling of doing the right thing (Knights and McCabe, 2003). Consequently, quality work, assessments and reprimands are not primarily seen as measures of control but rather as help and support, and are, therefore, welcomed by most of the caseworkers we interviewed. This means that the organizational culture builds a strong notion of form rationality in which loyalty towards organizational ideals is underlined in everyday organizational practice. A local manager expressed this as follows:

Above all, there is great loyalty to the organization and to the insurance. This makes us very inclined to do things correctly ... Well, you don't come here because this is such a cool job. You come here to work because you believe in the idea and that this job is meaningful as well as because you are very concerned about doing things the right way. So, at times when the organizational directives have been more or less detailed, obviously the fear of not complying or making mistakes grows over time.

The transparency ideal and the normative governing that is made possible by audit practices are central to the formation of a distinctive “organizational professionalism” and loyalty towards the organization, and these serve to shape caseworker subjectivities in relation to their work, such as their understanding of the mission of the organization and what constitutes “good” job performance.

Socio-space and technology as transparency tools

The organizational transparency ideal is also reflected in the way office space is designed. In some of the offices studied, the caseworkers were placed in open office landscapes with limited space for “unnoticed” actions, which in itself is an expression of the transparency ideal. The caseworkers were made visible to each other and their managers; it was visible when someone was working on the

computer; when someone was speaking on the phone, the conversation was overheard, and it was noticeable when someone had left the workplace. This type of workplace allows for no back region, which a room of one's own would possibly allow for. This means that the discretion that a closed door can bring to a caseworker (see Lipsky, 2010) is reduced. At the same time, our observations show that the transparency ideal, through the design of the office, penetrated the everyday life of caseworkers also in cases where staff had their own offices. As part of internal ways of communication, caseworkers were made visible to each other (and to superiors) through the means of technology. Caseworkers' activities were made visible to colleagues via the computer system that is used internally; the system shows the time when a caseworker was last active, indicating to colleagues and superiors if they are at their office space or not. All caseworkers and managers had access to each other's electronic schedule to see which activities were scheduled for the day.

Apart from these technological tools that directly or indirectly make the caseworkers visible, patterns of interaction can be seen as lived ideals of transparency and openness. As described, the dialogue around specific cases is an important part of casework; to ask and consult each other ad hoc is seen as an important support in caseworkers' day-to-day work. Caseworkers frequently walk into each other's rooms – often without knocking – when they have rooms of their own. One caseworker described the closed office door in terms of a wish to reduce the disturbance of sound – rather than a signal that the caseworker did not want to be disturbed.

Nevertheless, there were also examples of caseworkers and managers who tried to create space where transparency and openness did not reach, for instance, by creating a space for themselves within the open office landscape, or by leaving their computer and making phone calls where no one could overhear the conversation. Thus, even though the transparency ideal was manifested and lived out in many different ways, there were also techniques used by individual caseworkers and teams to avoid being exposed and made visible.

Conclusion

Audit society literature has primarily understood organizational transparency as an informational tool that enables accounting for and verifying performance in accordance with set objectives, both internally in organizations and externally in relation to their surroundings (Albu and Flyverbom, 2016). Such direct control by observation of performance is highly consequential for organizations. Nevertheless, based on this ethnographic study of local SSIA offices, we conclude that transparency as an organizational ideal can pervade an organization in a more fundamental way by building visual control into the organization's

infrastructure and social processes. This makes it constitutive for social relationships within the agency.

In this article, we accounted for a range of ways in which the transparency ideal is put into practice in the SSIA. Our study suggests that, while vertical transparency is indeed a key component in the normative governance of caseworkers, it is through the interplay of horizontal transparency practices – social governance in the teams and in the informal interactions and negotiations between caseworkers – that vertical transparency gains social power and becomes the most performative as a way of aligning staff with the normative regime of the agency. As an internalized ideal, transparency becomes a self-evident part of organizational life and, thus, of the everyday work of the caseworkers.

The analysis has shown how horizontal transparency in subtle interplay with vertical transparency (e.g. by “coaching leadership” management style and visualization of team performance) is an effective tool to achieve the standardization of behaviour as well as thinking, and to enforce norms and achieve conformity and compliance. Thus, horizontal transparency is critical for coordinating action and for shaping social relations. Normative control is dispersed through horizontal transparency practices within the organization, instead of centralized. It is internalized instead of becoming something that mobilizes caseworkers to ceremonial compliance or tactical adaptation. In light of this finding, we conclude that this organizational steering is not experienced as alienating (Lauri, 2016), as tyranny (Strathern, 2000), or as something that makes work less attractive (Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016); rather, it makes the work meaningful for SSIA caseworkers. An audit is welcomed by caseworkers; it is a confirmation of them “doing things in the right way”, thus constituting a source of job satisfaction and sense of achievement.

At SSIA, the internalized transparency norms as an organizational ideal contribute to creating a sense of meaningfulness and work satisfaction despite the fact that the governance towards a stricter application of the rules in Swedish sickness insurance and the focus on uniformity in case management have meant less scope for discretion for individual caseworkers. The findings of this study allow us to qualify the understanding of the consequences of the audit culture, transparency, and organizational governance for street-level bureaucrats’ experiences of their work. For example, horizontal transparency could be a basis for professional autonomy with and even disloyalty to organizational goals. However, we saw no evidence of this in the SSIA offices studied. The findings of this study must be viewed in the specific context of SSIA. In social work, a professional ideal of care for the client provides a basis for resistance to an audit culture (Lauri, 2016). Within the SSIA, however, the friction-free form of organizational professionalism that we observed is enabled by the fact that the

caseworkers lack a common educational background and welfare-professional identity, as SSIA caseworkers are recruited from a variety of occupations.

The findings must also be understood in relation to the policy context of SSIA. In the light of activation policy, there have been strong legislative and organizational attempts to directly steer and control the client-related work of frontline staff; e.g. by the introduction of politically-set numerical targets for the sickness absence rate in Sweden, the rehabilitation chain, and standardized work ability assessment. The SSIA has taken on a greater gatekeeping role in terms of a controlling and administrative function in relation to clients. The main role of SSIA and their frontline staff today is to assess benefit eligibility and, to a lesser extent, to engage in rehabilitation and in coordinating and supporting individual needs.

Another note of caution is that the empirical data was gathered from offices that complied with – or even exceeded – the organizational goals in relation to granted sickness benefits. Audit and transparency in these offices was primarily confirmation of a work task correctly performed within the organization. In offices where results strongly deviate from official goals, we might expect more resistance towards the ideals of transparency and more friction and tension.

Finally, the analysis also showed that the organizationally negotiated visibility regime also encompassed non-transparent practices. The organizational professionalism that was established was based on strategies of distancing in relation to the external environment; client relations were not prioritized (presently) nor was collaboration with other authorities. Internal transparency in combination with external non-transparency enabled an effective way of steering the caseworkers towards achieving the goal of reducing clients' days on sick leave. Thus, both internal transparency and relative seclusion in relation to clients and other actors are key components of the organizational mediation of activation policy.

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Does individualized employment support deliver what is promised? Findings from three European cities

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Abstract Since the inception of the European Employment Strategy in 1997, individualized employment support has been a key priority of the European Union and its Member States. Nevertheless, empirical research on the delivery of individualized services for the unemployed is still underdeveloped. In this article, we explore how local employment agencies in three European cities tailor counselling and services to jobseekers' individual needs. We find that limited service budgets and underdeveloped organizational interfaces with social service providers tend to constrain the substantive individualization of services in practice, which works in the disfavour of vulnerable jobseekers. Individualized counselling is more widespread, at least for

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selected target groups. However, organizational capacities for offering individualized problem assessment and advice vary considerably across “worlds of individualization” in Europe.

Keywords employability, social security administration, social policy, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom

Introduction

Activation and individualization are closely intertwined. Since the active turn in social policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, welfare states have increased their efforts to move even long-term unemployed individuals back into work. Given that individual obstacles to employment are manifold, this requires “individualized” – or “personalized” – policy approaches, the latter term being mostly used in the context of the United Kingdom (UK). As early as 1994, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) criticized “broad training programmes aimed at large groups of the unemployed” for being undirected and ineffective (OECD, 1994, p. 37). Since then, the European Commission (EC) has also become a strong advocate of individualized service delivery for recipients of public benefits. Most recently, the Commission Recommendation on the European Pillar of Social Rights (EC, 2017) declared a “right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects” for “everyone”, which includes “the right to receive support for job search, training and re-qualification”. As a result of these supranational efforts, service individualization has become a priority for welfare states across Europe, at least in political discourses. In this article, we explore to which degree the same also applies to policy practice.

Implementing individualized employment and social policies is by no means trivial, as a growing literature on the topic illustrates (for a recent overview, see Rice, 2017). How can the “agents of the welfare state” be capacitated to identify and tackle a broad range of issues that individuals may face on their way towards social inclusion and paid employment (Jewell, 2007)? And how can it be ensured that suitable support is made available to all welfare recipients under conditions of limited staff and service budgets?

In this article, we take a closer look at governance conditions that facilitate or hamper the individualization of service delivery at the street level (Lipsky, 2010). Following Toerien et al. (2013), we differentiate two elements of service individualization. The first is “procedural personalization”, which “refers to the ‘how’ of service provision, to the ways in which the adviser approaches

the interaction with the claimant” (Toerien et al., 2013, p. 313). In short, procedural individualization is about the content and quality of the counselling awarded to benefit recipients. The second element is “substantive personalization”, which “refers to the adviser’s capacity to provide services that are tailored to claimant’s needs and circumstances” (Toerien et al., 2013, p. 313). In short, substantive individualization is about the quality and fittingness of the services awarded to jobseekers.

Our analysis is based on local case studies of three European cities situated in different welfare and activation regimes: Italy, Germany and the UK (cf. Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004; Genova, 2008; Serrano Pascual, 2007). Based on semi-structured interviews with agency caseworkers and long-term unemployed citizens in late 2013, we describe service individualization practices in governance contexts that variously enable or constrain the tailoring of counselling and services to individual jobseekers’ life circumstances. Our analysis proceeds in the following order. First, we review the small but growing literature on service individualization and the governance conditions that enable or constrain its street-level implementation. Next, we present our research design and case selection, followed by a detailed analysis of implementation patterns in the delivery of individualized employment policies in three European cities. We conclude with some reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of varying activation governance configurations, and some suggestions for future research.

Service individualization: Enabling and constraining conditions

Service individualization is a “multi-interpretable” concept rather than “a worked out set of policy prescriptions” (Needham, 2011, p. 55). For example, in an early reflection on the issue, Valkenburg (2007, p. 26) identified five different individualization discourses that disagree on “the most fundamental issue” of “whether or not the individualization of activation policies enables people to be in charge of their own lives” (see also Borghi and van Berkel, 2007). Other authors take a more uniformly critical stance, lamenting that individualized policy provision means “that the societal and organizational demands placed on individuals increase” (Garsten, Jacobsson and Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2016, p. 268; see also Clarke, 2005). For our comparative analysis, we decided to adopt a more descriptive definition of service individualization as denoting the adjustment of services “to individual circumstances in order to increase their effectiveness” (van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007, p. 3).

According to Toerien et al. (2013), there are two roads to service individualization. On the one hand, effective service individualization presupposes an adequate assessment of jobseekers’ needs and a discussion of

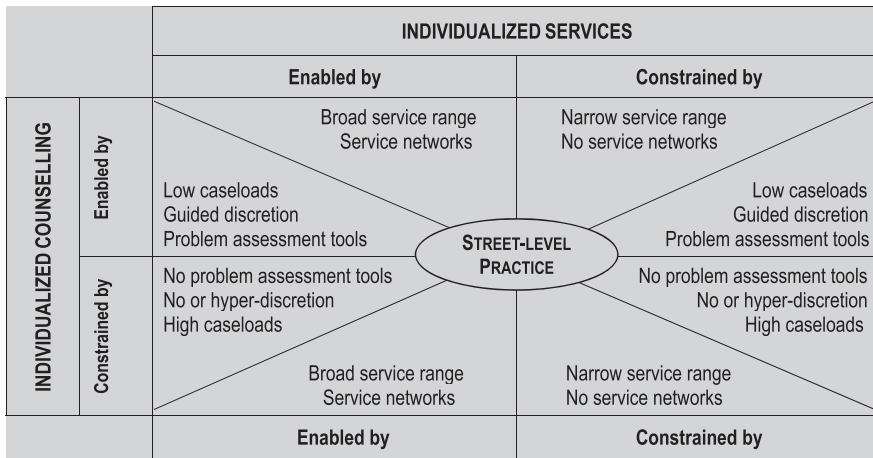
possible routes towards employment between a caseworker and jobseeker. This is what Toerien et al. (2013) refer to as “procedural personalization”. On the other hand, if farther-reaching problems are identified that jobseekers cannot solve of their own accord, service individualization requires substantive interventions that fit the jobseeker’s life circumstances and personal employment obstacles. This is what Toerien et al. (2013) refer to as “substantive personalization”.

Empirical research has brought to light a number of conditions that enable procedural individualization and hence client-centred problem assessment and advice. For example, profiling systems (i.e. administrative guidelines for the mapping of jobseekers’ characteristics, needs and aspirations) are of great help in identifying individual obstacles to employment, especially when not only work-related topics such as previous jobs, geographic mobility or qualifications are taken into account, but also social issues such as childcare needs, care responsibilities for family members, substance abuse, or physical/mental health issues (see Caswell, Marston and Larsen, 2010; Høybye-Mortensen, 2015). Likewise, officially mandated caseworker discretion coupled with guidelines for counselling and service selection is conducive to individualized employment support (see Rice, 2017; Toerien et al., 2013). Another precondition for procedural individualization is a sufficiently low caseworker–client ratio, because time pressure prohibits caseworkers from probing deeper into client issues and providing extensive information on available service offers (van Berkel and Knies, 2016).

Similarly for the substantive tailoring of service interventions to individual client cases, certain preconditions must be met. Most importantly, caseworkers should be able to choose from a broad array of employment services that address different obstacles to work, such as job-search advice, wage subsidies, internships, work experience, upskilling, occupational retraining, start-up grants or on-the-job mentoring. Ideally, referrals to social service providers should be possible for addressing less directly work-related issues that hinder jobseekers from entering the labour market. In particular, debt counselling, housing services, health care, child care, elderly care or addiction counselling play a role here.

Figure 1 summarizes under which conditions an effective individualization of counselling and services can be expected in street-level practice. Governance contexts that lack some or all of the aforementioned enabling conditions are designated as “constraining” individualized service delivery (cf. Hupe and Buffat, 2014; Rice, forthcoming). From the combination of conditions that either enable or constrain the procedural individualization of counselling and the substantive individualization of services, four ideal-typical “worlds” of service individualization can be deduced that were used as a sampling device and heuristic tool in this research. The upper-left quadrant signifies a world of comprehensive individualization where both counselling and services can be

Figure 1. *Individualized service delivery: A four-world heuristic*



Source: Authors.

effectively individualized. Contrariwise, the lower right quadrant marks a world of limited service individualization where few substantive services are available and caseworkers lack the time and procedural tools for advising jobseekers effectively. In between are two mixed worlds where either individualized counselling is enabled but caseworkers have few substantive services to offer (upper right quadrant), or where a broad range of services is available but caseworkers lack the tools for properly identifying suitable interventions for jobseekers with specific problem configurations (lower left quadrant). The latter world is unlikely to persist for long in practice because when governments spend large sums on public services, they are also likely to steer the process of service allocation. However, this quadrant might capture the scenario after a paradigm-changing welfare reform when street-level organizations need time to learn how to apply their new service options.

To investigate the degree to which substantive and procedural individualization is a reality in street-level practice in Europe, we sampled welfare agencies catering to the long-term unemployed in one city in Italy, Germany and the UK, respectively. The employment systems of Italy, Germany and the UK are characterized by different governance configurations, with central planning and regional implementation prevailing in Italy, Germany relying on joint ventures between the Federal Employment Agency and the municipalities, and the UK having installed a centrally monitored marketized activation scheme for the long-term unemployed (see Heidenreich and Rice, 2016; see also Serrano Pascual, 2007). In turn, the funding level of employment support differs between the three countries, with Germany having spent 0.9 per cent of its GDP on employment services in 2010,

compared to 0.35 and 0.4 per cent for Italy and the UK, respectively.¹ Therefore, our sample of cases is well-suited for assessing whether service individualization works differently under different governance conditions, and which organizational challenges present themselves in the provision of individualized client treatment at street level. Before we delve into our empirical analysis, the next section explains our case selection and methodology in more detail.

Research design and methodology

To shed more light on the interplay between enabling or constraining governance conditions and the procedural/substantive individualization of service-delivery to jobseekers, we sampled employment agencies from three “most-different” activation regimes: Italy, Germany and the UK. To increase the chances that service individualization would be observable at the agency level, we selected employment agencies in “innovative”, well-performing cities that we identified based on descriptive statistics at the NUTS-3-level as well as 56 previous interviews with policy-makers and agency managers (for more details, see Heidenreich and Rice, 2016).

In Italy, a large regional public employment agency was selected. In Germany, a local Jobcenter run jointly by a municipality and the Federal Employment Agency was chosen. In the UK, we selected a private Work Programme provider. Irrespective of national specificities, these organizations are comparable in the sense that they provide services to the long-term unemployed and are either part of, or contracted by, the national Public Employment Service. It should be emphasized that by comparing employment agencies in three European cities, we are not seeking to describe the respective countries or employment systems in their entirety. Instead, our focus is on the interplay between governance conditions and individualization practices at agency level. For this, we believe, our sampling technique is well suited, although no inferences can be drawn from our local “best-practice” examples about the three national activation systems as a whole.

For our data gathering, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews complemented by a document analysis (and a few participant observations when the opportunity presented itself). In total, 24 interviews with street-level workers were held between October 2013 and January 2014, based on a theoretical and opportunistic sampling strategy (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, 2003). In addition, we spoke to 24 jobseekers about how they experienced the respective agencies’ service provision. All interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic matrixes or a coding software (MAXQDA/NVivo10). Several rounds of coding led us to the identification of the characteristic street-level individualization patterns that are presented below.

1. Eurostat data <ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database> for the year 2010 is the last year for which comparative figures are available.

In the next section, the three local cases are presented in turn. Each case begins with an overview of the relevant governance features of the national and possibly local activation context, before we present our interview material to show how governance conditions enable or constrain the procedural and/or substantive individualization of service delivery to long-term unemployed individuals in practice.

Individualized service delivery in a city in Italy

Our first case is an Italian city. In the Italian context, activation programmes are usually designed and funded by the national Ministry of Labour or the Regional Councils, frequently involving European Social Fund money. Programme implementation is under the aegis of provincial public agencies, often in the form of public-private partnerships. Due to central and regional control over resources and instrument design, individual agencies have little room for designing locally-specific instruments (see Catalano, Graziano and Bassoli, 2016; Monticelli, 2014). Furthermore, programmes tend to be limited to a small number of programmes that change each year and target specific groups such as people with a certain vocational background, women, young people, older workers or the long-term unemployed. Those for whom no targeted activation programmes are available may receive counselling – if they are (made) aware of this possibility – but otherwise, they are left to their own devices.

Within the above-sketched limited space for service individualization, local caseworkers have some room for the “procedural individualization” of the counselling they provide to jobseekers. For example, although a systematic profiling system is not used at our local study site, the topics of education, work history, language skills and IT skills are discussed when someone inscribes in the so-called unemployment lists for receiving financial benefits. This gives caseworkers the chance to identify individual counselling needs and refer jobseekers to other service desks such as an open-space area in the building where one can use the Internet, look for jobs online or get help in drawing up a CV, as one caseworker described:

If I encounter a smart person, I explain to them the functioning of our internet site and give them the opportunity to go to [the open-space area]. We treat everybody in the same way. According to their needs I give them the right hints. If they do not have access to the Internet, I tell them to go to the [open-space area] or some public library.

Referrals to the few available substantive activation programmes are also highly discretionary. If a person has vocational skills, caseworkers might refer them directly to the provincial Training and Work-Oriented Centre to learn about

suitable offers. More often, however, programme participants are recruited by caseworkers screening the unemployment lists for candidates matching certain criteria, such as long-term unemployed with previous experience in mechanical design. It is also possible for jobseekers to apply for an activation programme of their own accord, but this requires a computer, internet connection and CV-writing skills, which tends to exclude certain groups such as the older unemployed. Therefore, whether an unemployed person learns of and/or is recruited for an activation programme seems to be partly a matter of chance in our Italian city case.

Once a jobseeker has been recruited for an activation programme, however, procedural individualization takes on a more systematic form. At our study site, activation programmes generally start with a psycho-behavioural test whose outcomes are discussed at great length, as one programme caseworker explained:

When the score is low, it means the person is semi-autonomous and only needs help drawing up a CV and finding suitable job offers. If the score is medium or high, there are several potential activities ranging from career guidance to counselling, tutoring, and coaching.

However, caseworkers sometimes struggle with overly standardized intake forms that inhibit them from making adequate problem assessments, as the following statement by a programme caseworker implies:

The most useless forms are the regional ones, they don't fit well with all user types and in specific programmes such as ... [one] for unemployed people below 29 years, we had to revise the form because it was not fitting people entering the labour market for the first time, it was designed for people who already had professional work experience.

Standardized forms and guidelines stand not only in the way of individualized problem assessments, but also of an individualized service selection at our study site. Thus, within activation programmes, formal rules often predefine how much time and money is to be spent on specific programme activities such as psycho-behavioural testing, CV updating, training activities or classes. This leaves little room for addressing social issues such as substance abuse or childcare. Furthermore, the foreseen service interventions are typically directly work-focused, as evinced by the previous quote (“... activities ranging from career guidance to counselling, tutoring, and coaching”). Therefore, programme participants seem to receive rather similar and exclusively job-focused substantive treatment in the end, despite a very detailed and differentiated programme intake procedure. This means that the “substantive individualization” of service interventions to programme participants’ circumstances is limited in practice.

For jobseekers who are not recruited for an activation programme, service interventions are even more limited. Disabled people may receive specialized services, but for everyone else, little is offered beyond specialized counselling (for targeted groups such as migrants or women with family issues; and on targeted issues such as parental leave, life-long learning, self-employment or atypical work contracts). Especially when clients are vulnerable and have social problems in addition to being unemployed, they are unlikely to receive service assistance from the provincial Employment Centre due to underdeveloped service interfaces with municipal social service providers, as one manager expressed:

If she has both social problems (of which the municipality is in charge) and employment issues (of which the province is in charge), ... there is quite a risk that more capable individuals will receive subsidies but others none, due to the two public institutions not communicating.

In summary, governance conditions in our Italian city seem to lead to a dualization of service individualization between a few specially targeted groups and everyone else. In the experience of “regular” jobseekers, service individualization is severely constrained both in procedural and substantive terms, due to a small service portfolio, underdeveloped organizational ties with social service providers, and a lack of systematic profiling and referral procedures. As a result, most jobseekers are never in contact with the Employment Centre again after their inscription in the so-called unemployment lists. As one jobseeker reported,

About three years ago, I came here to inscribe in the unemployment lists ... I came back in July of this year and they told me, “It is your job to look for a job”. ... A week ago, I received a letter with the invitation to this meeting. I had forgotten that I was inscribed, I never thought about it after my registration. I forgot about the possibility to come here, ask questions and receive some advice.

The treatment of programme participants is more individualized, both in substantive and procedural terms, due to systematic (albeit sometimes overly rigid) profiling procedures, service selection guidelines and the availability of some employment services, although social issues remain off radar. In the words of one jobseeker:

The first meeting [at the Employment Centre] was terrible. ... There was a long queue of desks, with people who asked you to sit down and describe your experiences ... The one who talked to me ... asked me just a few questions and ... I was wondering what he could have written in that profile, nothing really and he

let me go very quickly ... When I came to the Training and Work-Orientation Centre, ... it was the same kind of procedure that I underwent back in 2009, [but] very detailed, well done, it made sense.

Our Italian local case thus seems to lean towards the lower right quadrant in Figure 1 (limited individualization), although a higher degree of service individualization is awarded to a small number of activation programme participants.

Individualized service delivery in a city in Germany

Our German case is a local Jobcenter. Like 303 of the 407 German Jobcenters, it is co-managed by the Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit* – FEA) and a municipality. This governance arrangement brings together the FEA’s time-tested and relatively standardized employment service portfolio with the social services provided by the municipality and social partners. Since the Hartz reforms of the early 2000s, activation in Germany has been guided by the motto “Enabling and Demanding” (*Fördern und Fordern*). This is reflected not only in the integration agreement that caseworkers and clients sign during their first meeting and update regularly, but also in the applicability of a wide range of interventions that cover not only substantive services, but also job-search requirements and sanctions.

In the FEA’s employment system, several governance features enable the “procedural individualization” of service-delivery at the Jobcenter. To start with, caseloads are considerably lower for so-called case managers dealing with jobseekers with complex problems than for “regular” caseworkers dealing with “regular” jobseekers. Caseloads are also generally reduced for caseworkers focusing on special target groups such as young people, disabled people, lone parents or participants in national employment programmes (e.g. for older unemployed people or young people without a vocational qualification). At our study site, the caseworker–client ratio ranged from about 70 to 80 clients per case-manager or specialized caseworker to a maximum of 450 clients per regular caseworker. This means that jobseekers with complex problems can be counselled more intensively and hence in a more individualized fashion than work-ready jobseekers – as long as complex problems are diagnosed as such, and/or enough case managers are available, and/or someone belongs to a specially targeted group. For regular jobseekers, counselling tends to be relatively standardized and less individualized, however, as one caseworker admitted:

Of course, someone with a caseload of 400 customers cannot look deeply into a single client case, that's simply impossible. They can't get a detailed picture of the personal circumstances, it really doesn't work.

Whether a jobseeker is diagnosed as a “regular” case or a “complex” case emerges from the FEA's profiling system VerBIS, which is used by all Jobcenters that are joint ventures between the FEA and a municipality. The VerBIS profiling categories focus mainly on jobseekers' “strengths” and “potential” in terms of skills, motivation and circumstances (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2013), but also social problems can be taken into account, as one caseworker explained:

Of course, I cannot embark on a job-search trajectory with someone and say, “Let's ... get you into work” if I know he's newly divorced or he's currently not allowed to see his child ..., of course he won't be in the state of mind to apply for jobs ... That's why we must first mitigate such personal circumstances ... in order to put him back in the mind frame of applying for jobs.

Although service allocation guidelines exist (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2013), there is ample room for discretion at the Jobcenter. As one caseworker put it:

We have discretionary space in virtually all procedures we can or must apply. Whether it's about activation measures or funding – everything, basically.

In this discretionary context, street-level staff act as gatekeepers towards detailed information about service instruments as well as access to substantive services. If a caseworker sees no need to counsel a jobseeker intensively, counselling may be limited to mere job-search advice. By contrast, if a caseworker is willing to “invest” in a jobseeker, a broad range of employment services are available, allowing for the “substantive individualization” of service delivery to unemployed individuals. As one caseworker remarked:

We currently have so many measures at our disposal that it almost becomes difficult to keep track. ... I keep all of them in a folder so that I can look them up: What might fit the client? It's dizzying. But otherwise, ... we really have many instruments that make sense, as long as you use them correctly.

Technically, even social services are to play a role in the individualized service provision of German Jobcenters, with §16a of the Social Code Book II specifying child care, elderly care, debt counselling, psycho-social counselling and addiction counselling. However, organizational interfaces between the Jobcenter and

municipal social service organizations seemed not to be overly developed at the local Jobcentre we studied (see also Kaltenborn and Kaps, 2012). In the words of one caseworker:

Debt counselling – they can pursue that on their own, I can't support them with that. I can only tell them where the organizations offering debt counselling are located, I can hand out flyers. If they go there, they go there. If they don't go there, there is nothing I can do.

In summary, our exploratory findings indicate that the governance structure of the FEA's employment system in principle enables the individualized treatment of jobseekers, both in procedural and in substantive terms. This applies particularly to vulnerable clients, whereas “regular” clients tend to receive more standardized support – quite in contrast to our Italian local case. A jobseeker who transferred from a regular caseworker to a case manager put it as follows:

From regular caseworkers, I would often hear, “We have reached the end of our 30 minutes, we can't do much else now”. And this is really different here. She says, “Well, if we need another 15 minutes, then the next person simply has to wait”. ... It's not like everything is subjected to time pressure.

It is also important to note, however, that in the highly discretionary German governance context, individual caseworkers play a key role in deciding how much time and resources will be invested in each jobseeker. Therefore, it is crucial that caseworkers are professionally trained to exercise their discretion wisely. As one jobseeker observed:

In the beginning, I had to beg a lot at the Jobcenter. ... That I'm really motivated and I'm really willing to do a lot. ... And then I first did a substitute job. And I really gave my best, to prove to them that I'm really willing. And I believe it was only then that they opened up and said, “Yes, OK, we'll see to it that we find funding for you”.

Jobcenter managers should also ensure that target group boundaries do not work to the disfavour of jobseekers who have not been diagnosed as complex cases and/or for whom no specialized caseworker or national programme is available. For example, an immigrant jobseeker told us:

I have said tearfully, “Handicapped people have rights, but I have no rights.”

And a young jobseeker recounted the following experience:

I wanted to train to be a carpenter ... But the problem was that there wasn't any provider left for that ... Beside the youth workshop, but for that I was again too old.

Overall, our German local case seems to lean towards the upper left quadrant (comprehensive individualization) of the ideal-typical Figure 1, but with work-ready clients receiving less individualized support than vulnerable ones, and complex cases sometimes falling through the cracks of service individualization when they are not diagnosed as such.

Individualized service delivery in a city in the United Kingdom

In our final research context, the UK, we interviewed staff and jobseekers at the local branch of a Work Programme (WP) provider organization. The Work Programme was a marketized employment support scheme for the long-term unemployed in the UK between June 2011 and April 2017 (in the meantime, it has been replaced by the much smaller Work and Health Programme). The WP prime providers (or “primes”) were chosen through a market tendering process. Due to a required annual turnover of not below 20 million pounds (GBP), only relatively large, multinational companies were selected. The WP “black-box” delivery model meant that the primes were “completely free to design the support they offer[ed]” (Freud, 2011). Therefore, each of the primes operated different services and administrative procedures, yet all providers had to adhere to Minimum Service Delivery Standards. Payment was by results in terms of job insertion and the duration of employment, but there was a differentiation of payments depending on jobseekers’ degree of vulnerability (as measured by age group and benefit type; see Carter and Whitworth, 2015; Fuertes and McQuaid, 2016).

According to our interviews, “procedural individualization” was quite pronounced at the studied WP provider organization. To begin with, all participants were assigned a personal “advisor” to establish a trustful counselling relationship. During the first interview(s), a detailed problem assessment was carried out on the basis of a standardized questionnaire covering the jobseeker’s current situation, personal goals, barriers to employment and “distance” from the labour market. On this basis, the job-search process was planned and possible support services were identified. As in our German case, caseworkers had much room for discretion in this process. As one caseworker put it:

As advisors, we ... are encouraged to be creative. We have as much flexibility as we want, as long as it is sticking within the parameters of helping somebody into employment.

However, the limited availability of substantive services meant that discretion was mainly related to the content and frequency of the counselling (“I can’t help everyone, but I can help them by knowing where they need to go”; “I will ask them: How frequently do you want to come in?”). Another element of procedural discretion emerging from our interviews was that caseworkers had a tendency to meet work-ready clients more frequently than vulnerable clients, as one caseworker admitted:

I try and fit in my slightly more job-ready clients more regularly. I would be looking to see them every two weeks if possible. At the moment I’m not really quite managing that. And anyone else, maybe every once a month. I’ve got other clients that I might only see every two or three months, depending on their situation.

Most likely, caseworkers’ personalized job insertion targets go a long way in explaining why relatively job-ready individuals were granted more counselling time than vulnerable individuals at our British study site:

It’s fairly flexible, but I suppose the reality is as well that you have quite a strict target to meet. So as much as it’s all very flexible, you wouldn’t want to be out of the office or spending too much time with any one client, because you’ve got a big caseload as well. It’s flexible ... yeah, as long as you hit your target, it’s not a problem.

Further evidence that the creaming of “promising” clients was built into the WP governance structure is provided by the fact that caseworkers focusing on job-ready individuals had lower caseloads than caseworkers focusing on vulnerable individuals in our British local case (roughly: 80 versus 250). This is a side effect of a marketized governance scheme in which provider organizations had to squeeze a profit from fairly low funding margins – which led them to direct more attention towards clients with whom a quick profit could be earned.

Another consequence of the tight funding scheme underlying the Work Programme was a limited scope for the “substantive individualization” of services. Some substantive services were offered at our study site, such as in-house courses (usually short-term vocational training), work experience and contracted services for people with physical disabilities, learning difficulties or

drug addiction. The studied provider organization also provided in-work support to every participant who had found work. Apart from this, however, service delivery seemed to be limited mostly to intensive job-search and life counselling, as one jobseeker reported:

When I first came, she was like, “Right, your plan for this week is to remake your CV”, ... and then the following week it was like the cover letter thing, and now it’s, “Right, if we maybe send out ten CVs, and you can maybe make five or ten phone calls, as well as doing some job search ... and then, if that doesn’t work, we’ll sort of re-evaluate the CV, or we’ll try some other way of contacting people and finding work.”

In summary, the United Kingdom Work Programme provider case paints the picture of limited funds leading to more resources going into counsellors than into services, and “promising” jobseekers receiving more intensive counselling than vulnerable ones, a finding that is corroborated by other studies of the Work Programme’s implementation (see Carter and Whitworth, 2015; Fuertes and Lindsay, 2015; Newton et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that our jobseeker respondents were overall very satisfied with the counselling they received from their WP provider, comparing it favourably to the service provision of Jobcentre Plus, as evinced by the following jobseeker quote:

I think the attitude of the Jobcentre is that they don’t really care, you’re just a number, you go in and sign on and you go. Whereas here, they’re very – “what do you want to do, what do you need to do, what can we do for you to get you back into work?”

Jobseekers also reported that their WP advisers tackled not only purely work-related issues, but also took into consideration private or social issues that posed obstacles to employment:

They’ll listen and help you and advise you where they can, so it’s not always about work, even though that’s what it’s based all around. ... They helped me when I told them about my house and what happened, they looked at the letter, seeing if they could help and seeing what they could do and stuff ..., they gave me numbers.

My passport had expired. ... I couldn’t continue with my training working in the company because I didn’t have a valid passport ..., so I came down and spoke to somebody here ... and yes, [clicks fingers] like that, on the same day, on the same

day, you know, ... they gave me ... a kind of a forwarding amount of money to ... get this.

Overall, the United Kingdom local case appears as coming quite close to the right upper quadrant of Figure 1 (procedural individualization only).

Discussion: The promise of service individualization – What is delivered?

As our three local cases illustrate, it is not without a challenge to put individualized policy schemes into practice. Implementing agencies struggle with constrained budgets and a shortage of staff, which makes it difficult to conduct detailed intake interviews with every jobseeker and provide everyone with adequate advice and services. Nevertheless, even in a world of resource constraints, some governance configurations seem to be more conducive to service individualization than others. Below, we discuss three tentative lessons that can be drawn from our exploratory research, and outline some unaddressed challenges that came to the fore in our sample of three European cities.

First, our findings reiterate that comprehensive service individualization costs money. This may sound trivial, but we emphasize this point here because active labour market reforms sometimes insinuate that individualized service provision is more effective and hence justifies budget cuts (cf. Hupe and Buffat, 2014) – with dubious prospects of success, from the point of view of our research. What we observed in two European cities is that when welfare agencies have limited funds available, they invest more in staff than in services, and provide individualized counselling only to specific groups (such as work-ready unemployed in the United Kingdom case, or special target groups of national/EU-wide programmes in the Italian case). Individualized counselling alone, in turn, addresses only “soft” issues such as possible motivational deficits, communication barriers or a lack of knowledge of the system, but it leaves jobseekers who have complex problems largely to their own devices.

A second tentative lesson that can be drawn from our research is that individualized counselling presupposes caseworkers who have the time and discretion to explore the specificities of each case, and to flexibly adjust the frequency, duration and content of the counselling. However, discretion and flexibility are not enough to ensure that all jobseekers receive individualized advice because high caseloads and organizational or personal performance targets induce caseworkers to use their discretion in ways that disadvantage vulnerable jobseekers (cf. Keiser, 2010). Therefore, it is vital to measure organizational or individual performance not only in terms of bureaucratic workload or

job-insertion rates – the latter promoting the creaming of “promising” jobseekers, as in the United Kingdom case. Equally, it is important to keep caseloads sufficiently low to allow for individualized counselling conversations.

A final lesson to be drawn, especially from the local case in Germany, is that when a governance context is in principle conducive to procedural and substantive individualization, caseworkers assume a key role in actualizing this potential in practice. Therefore, even in mature employment systems, it is vital to continually invest in the professional training of caseworkers to ensure that adequate attention is paid both to directly employment-related issues and relevant social problems, and that caseworkers routinely work with a broad range of services rather than only a limited set of easily applicable measures.

Overall, our exploratory study confirms the crucial importance of (national or local) governance arrangements for street-level individualization practices (cf. Borghi and van Berkel, 2007; Heidenreich and Rice, 2016; Jewell, 2007; van Berkel, van der Aa and van Gestel, 2010). Different worlds of service individualization are characterized not only by varying degrees of procedural and substantive individualization, but also by different challenges in organizing the delivery of individualized service provision. The three varieties of service individualization described in this article open up interesting questions for further study: Which individualization patterns emerge in other governance settings? Do individualized activation policies – in the way they are implemented – help all jobseekers, or do they perpetuate existing labour market inequalities? And finally, how can it be ensured that all jobseekers benefit equally from service individualization? We look forward to more comparative research on the interplay between the governance and practice of service individualization. We also welcome further theory-building endeavours, to which we provided an exploratory stepping stone in this article.

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BOOK REVIEW

Gilbert, Neil. **Never enough: Capitalism and the progressive spirit.** Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. 219 pp. ISBN 978-01-9936-133-5.

The challenging title of Neil Gilbert's latest book derives from the rising concern found in economically advanced economies about the future of the traditional welfare state. The specific elements of this concern include: demographic ageing; rising protectionism that may block the potential of net immigration to compensate for the declining size of the active labour force; growing public deficits and debts that limit the state's potential for social protection, social transfers and social investment; stagnant or declining productivity levels; speculations about the extent of job destruction to be caused by the increased use of robots and artificial intelligence; and declining democracy and rising populism and conservatism, which probably reflect popular frustration following a decade of shareholders' rising profits that were mainly invested in mergers and buy-backs rather than in improvements in production and new technology, conditions of work and pay as well as social investments (education, infrastructure, etc.).

This situation increasingly blocks demands by the liberal/progressive movement for massive state transfers to mitigate the adverse effects of distribution via the market, blaming the latter for rising poverty and inequality and declining social and labour mobility.

Gilbert describes the origins and development of the "progressive spirit" in the United States (US), and the various identities that underpin the term "progressives". Their continuously expanding demands on the State, explain, in his view, why the "progressive spirit" has gone adrift. The term designates a group of political activists who have been promoting basic social, civil and human rights since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1960s, their designation in the US changed first to "liberals" and later on to "progressives". Both share a high regard for government's role in constraining the destructive forces of capitalism and rectifying its distributional shortcomings. From the inception of the industrial revolution through the twentieth century, progressives have sought to improve society by promoting human rights, economic security and protecting the environment, while enhancing people's material well-being. Their major achievement was the creation of the welfare state, which granted an unprecedented level of social protection to the average citizen. Yet views differ about the degree to which the economy should support the welfare state, and to where to direct the money – with conservatives preferring the market's invisible hand rather than the collective character of the welfare state.

Gilbert describes these concerns, which have fed intense debates among academics in the advanced economies since the 1960s about the justification for, and extent of the necessary and/or acceptable rising role of, the state funding of social transfers – demands that thinkers and political parties both on the Left and the Right, eventually, generally accepted. In many ways, they served for a few decades as an institutional counterforce to capitalism – by providing wide coverage in most advanced welfare states for universal pensions, health care, education, disability insurance,

unemployment insurance, and child and family benefits. This significant expansion raised the bill for public finances from 13 per cent of GDP in 1960 to almost 30 per cent in 2009, having grown by more than 10 per cent between 2007 and 2009.

Despite this, it looked as if the very success of the expanded welfare state was eroding the general political consensus, with a movement in favour of more decentralized power, a mixed economy and increased political pluralism. Indeed, by the 1990s, the welfare state had undergone reforms that included the private delivery of assistance to the needy, while its focus turned to promoting labour force participation and the work ethic, increasing attention to individual responsibility, delaying the retirement age, while checking the mounting costs of social benefits to maintain business competitiveness in global markets.

US progressives continued their pursuit of equality and improved social well-being. Absent, however, from among the current generation of progressive thinkers has been the voicing of a compelling case for why this is necessary. This leads Gilbert to challenge the basic progressive assumptions about poverty, inequality, social mobility and cradle-to-grave welfare spending, which constitute the four major themes of the book. He critically questions the current state of US society and economy and the implications for government's role in sustaining the "good society".

He notes that US poverty has different facets and its definitions that have been changing over time and economic cycles. It includes diverse types of measurement, with changing components. For instance, by excluding from poverty measures the value of social benefits that assist poor people, the evaluation of actual poverty is distorted. Gilbert cites the huge mismatch in official data for low-income household expenditure and reported pre-tax income as evidence of this distortion.

Poverty has a temporal dimension that the official measure of poverty fails to account for. Over time, low-income households include a high proportion of families experiencing a temporary, though significant, income reduction (weekly, monthly, etc.), linked to loss of employment, job changes, divorce, returning to school, or dropping out of the labour force to provide care. Data collection and reporting on poverty are not sensitive to the duration of family status below the poverty line or to the possibility to draw down savings and other resources/assets. This raises the issue of how to interpret these fluctuations in lifetime income. Is the high incidence of poverty indicative of a major social problem, a normal part of the life course, or the path to prosperity for many, if not most of the population? Over the life course, at least half of people living in poverty had lived for some time in a relatively well-off household. This seems to show that US welfare capitalism is less defective than might be inferred from lifetime poverty rates.

In his 1958 best-seller *The Affluent Society*, Kenneth Galbraith challenged the conventional view of poverty as a major social problem in the US, and was not alone in this view among academics. He recognized that poverty continued in the US, with about a tenth of the population in need of assistance. Galbraith divided poverty into two groups – "insular poverty", associated with living in economically depressed regions, and "case poverty" of people with various personal handicaps. In neither case did he think that government income transfers could remedy personal hardship and increase the level of consumption of poor people. He called instead for greater investment in public services that would enhance community life and build human capital by offering, for example, educational programmes to disadvantaged children, anticipating a major shift in modern welfare states towards social investment to enhance productivity and individual responsibility. Gilbert regrets that the above facts are mentioned only rarely in reports about official poverty incidence in the US, because this delays finding solutions to address it.

Turning to inequality, Gilbert considers that the success of the welfare state in reducing the poverty rate has deprived the progressive reformers of a compelling moral argument for altering the free-market distribution of resources through further government transfers to the poor. Rather, they turned to arguing that the root cause of social distress has a link to economic inequality, which constitutes the major distributional defect of capitalism. Their proposals to advance equality via taxation of the super-rich does not raise much public opposition, and their argument for income redistribution through the tax system is supported owing to the prevailing assumption that economic inequality is inherently bad. However, there is little discussion about how much inequality is unacceptable or fair, and how precise or reliable are the estimates of inequality. As with measuring poverty, this is a complex task requiring income measurements in parallel with assessments of demographic changes, geographic differences and changing fortunes over the life course. So, while income inequality in the US is generally perceived to have dramatically increased over the past three decades, its extent and implications are disputed in the research, as are the limits of each evaluation or index, including the Gini. Various other potentially adverse effects of economic inequality are that it undermines trust, social solidarity and a sense of fairness that can lead to friction in the labour market, undermining motivation to work or leading to social unrest that can undermine growth.

Progressives consider social mobility as a means to increase economic equality. Gilbert recalls that it indicates the extent to which society affords its citizens an equal opportunity to rise above the economic status into which they were born. There are a number of critical questions here. What amount of upward and downward movement is fair and beneficial? To what extent does individual merit drive upward mobility, and to what extent does a lack of opportunity or a lack of inherited privilege block mobility? What is the socially desirable rate of upward and, correspondingly, downward mobility? He notes that there is persuasive evidence that the US rate of social mobility has not changed since at least 1971, despite the rise in inequality over the past five decades. He mentions four characteristics related to social mobility; namely, racial segregation, high-school dropout rates, percentage of single mothers, and amounts of social capital, with the fraction of children in single-parent families constituting the strongest predictor of lower mobility. The author acknowledges that there is some evidence that intense early intervention can produce beneficial outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children.

The last problematic policy issue that has divided progressives and conservatives since the inception of the welfare state is who should be eligible for public aid, i.e. the universalism–selectivity dichotomy. Conservatives prefer selectivity, with social welfare programmes focusing on people who lack the resources to cope with economic, psychological and physical distress. While progressives prefer universalism, considering that the state should provide a full range of social services and cash transfers to all citizens, whether rich or poor. Currently, the rising cost of cradle-to-grave social benefits, in the wider context of demographic ageing and global competition, exerts fiscal pressures to concentrate these on those most in need, who cannot afford the necessities of daily living. Gilbert notes that there is recognition that the fiscal challenge of an ageing society demands some adjustment to ensure that the erosion of social security benefits does not deprive those with the least resources from access to a decent retirement income.

Gilbert concludes by suggesting some approaches that could help “progressive conservatism” advance towards the “good society” objective. In the modern era of abundance, it is possible in Gilbert’s view to formulate policies that consolidate social spending, afford a decent standard of



living for the chronic poor, and promote effective parental functioning and quality care for children from disadvantages families, while reinforcing a sense of public purpose and unity through national service.

This book offers a broad historical perspective of the achievements and constraints of the welfare state and the quest of progressives for a “good society”. It relates to many current social and economic concerns in a period of global socio-political, economic and technological transition. The issues and policy developments are substantively argued and documented. The reflections on the academic and philosophical debates presented should be most helpful to policy-makers, social and economic actors as well as citizens, permitting to formulate the necessary policies to address the major issues facing the upcoming generation.

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