

#### Building Active Welfare States: How Policy Shapes Caseworker Practice

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#### Background of the research

- **PhD** research at VU University Amsterdam, 2009-2013 (defense: 2015)
- Interviews with 60 managers and caseworkers in municipal employment agencies, plus 23 interviews with scientific/professional experts, Feb. 2010 – Oct. 2012
- Three countries: Netherlands, Denmark, UK



#### **Research question**

How are active labour market policies translated into street-level **discourses** and **practices** in the Netherlands, Denmark and Great Britain, and what is the role of policy design and the wider welfare-state **context** in shaping caseworker agency?



#### **Two different activation systems**

	NL	DK
Legal basis	Work and Social Assistance Act	Act on an Active Social Policy / Act on an Active Employment Policy
Main actors	Municipal employment agencies, sometimes joint municipal-PES jobcentres, strong but declining role of private providers	Municipal employment agencies responsible for insured & non-insured beneficiaries, some private providers
Administrative authority	Highly devolved: Municipal autonomy over instruments and procedures; exception: lone parents with children under 5 (starter's qualification)	Centralized decentralized: Some municipal autonomy over instruments but centrally prescribed instrument types and procedures (e.g. frequency of consultations, profiling etc.)
Funding	2011/12: Two budgets – activation budget (earmarked) and benefit budget (non-earmarked) $\rightarrow$ incentive games	Reimbursement of reintegration trajectories depending on timing and type of intervention $\rightarrow$ 'pedagogical' incentives
Prof. culture	Entrepreneurial & investment-orientated	Professional-bureaucratic



## **Activation in practice**

- Let us begin with the results of an exploratory vignette study (Chapter 7 of the PhD thesis; Rice 2017)
- Two hypothetical clients:



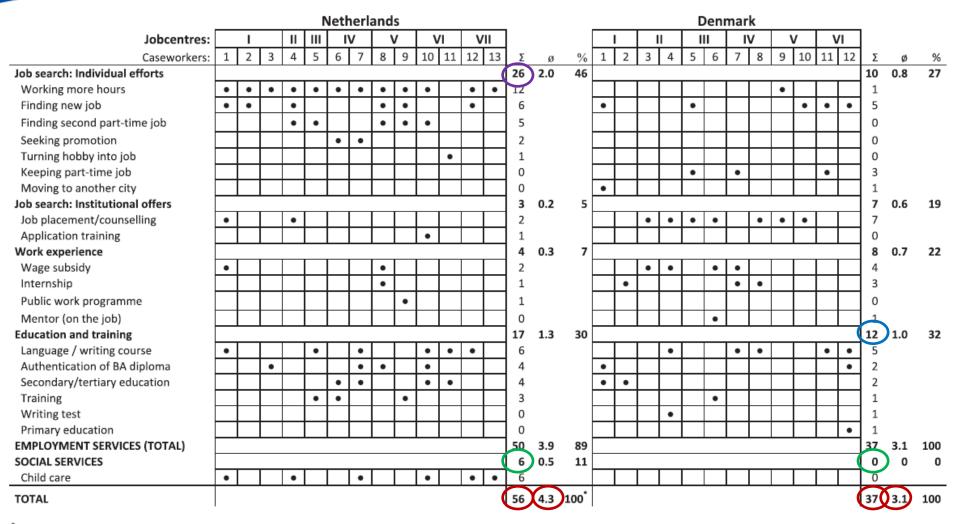
 Bart Boonstra/Jørgen Andersen (56, single, recovering from depression, care responsibilities for a disabled sister; former purchasing agent, adult education in Business Studies)



 Emina Mujačić (38, from Bosnia, lone parent of two children (5 & 8); B.A. in fashion design, works four hours per week as a seamstress)



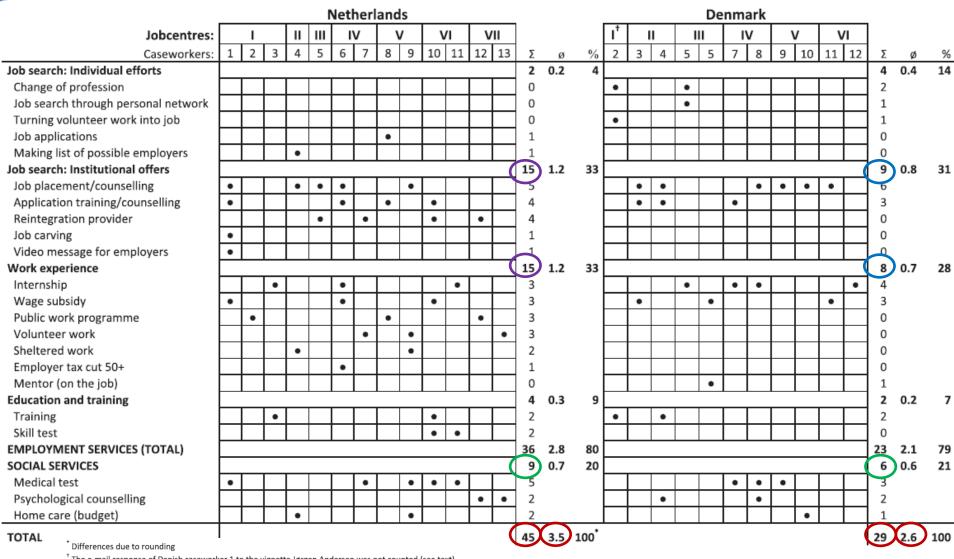




<sup>\*</sup> Differences due to rounding







<sup>+</sup> The e-mail response of Danish caseworker 1 to the vignette Jørgen Andersen was not counted (see text).

FIGURE 2 Caseworker responses to the vignette Jørgen Andersen (Denmark)/Bart Boonstra (Netherlands)



## Main similarities & differences (I)

- Similar interventions are used in both contexts. But: Dutch municipalities tend to offer, and Dutch caseworkers tend to consider, a broader range of services – especially for vulnerable clients. Reason: Municipal & individual discretion in NL
- Flanking social services: (Some) care assistance is offered in both countries, childcare support is only offered in NL. Reason: institutional context (subsidized public childcare in DK); political culture?



## Main similarities & differences (I)

- Targeting: Visible in both countries (especially regarding training). Reason: Discretion (NL), target group-specific procedures (DK)
- However, on the whole, Danish caseworkers tend to choose more similar approaches across client groups than Dutch caseworkers, who tend to choose a "work first" approach for work-ready clients but a more enabling approach for vulnerable clients. Reason: Discretion plus 'social investmentorientated' professional culture in NL (see below)



#### Lessons learned (1)

- Caseworker discretion seems to be conducive to a social investment-orientated activation approach (is a service investment likely to "pay off?")
- Local autonomy tends to increase the range of services available to clients – provided that there are sufficient resources for experimenting with new service instruments
- In both countries: underdeveloped **service interfaces** with providers of social services



## **Different professional cultures (Chapter 5)**

#### • NL: Entrepreneurial & investment-orientated

- Look, if you think from the beginning: 'This is not going to go very far,' then you see to it that the person does some volunteer work and then you're happy and close the project. You always have some ambition, but you're not going to **invest** a lot of **money** in a case like that.
- Unemployment seen mainly as an individual problem
  - Are you unable, are you unwilling, is it a combination?
- DK: Professional-bureaucratic
- Unemployment seen mainly as a structural problem
  - Well, they're used to working, they are usually readily employable, but there is no labour market for them, you could say.



#### **Discursive strategies of caseworkers**

- NL
  - The basis: Making a connection
  - Invoking rational interests
  - Invoking social responsibilities
  - Unearthing personal visions and dreams
  - Encouraging concrete actions
- DK
  - The basis: Talking procedures
  - Talking education
  - Talking (job) mobility
  - Invoking rational interests
  - Invoking social norms
  - Invoking personal visions and dreams
  - Encouraging concrete actions

You learn every time how to communicate in a different way and how to establish better contact and ask good questions, because that's what it's mainly about. To ask good questions and build trust with such a client. what tips the scale is whether you give clients the feeling that they also have a role in this

> *it is your trajectory, it is your party. So the more you put into it, the more you get out of it*

> > These are

clients that you have to motivate a lot, to make them realize that work is in fact something very positive because you contribute to society again, you can hold your head high and say to your neighbour, 'I'm off to work, I'm doing this and that, and I'm earning my own money'. And you can be a role model for your children.

What do people find important in their life? ... That's what it's about,isn't it. ... So that they can use that as a source of motivation for also doing other thingsisn't it. ... So that they can use that, don't you. If you don't know what you're doingthat give them less pleasure. You need that, don't you. If you don't know what you're doingit for, you're not going to succeed.we going to do next?

We have to listen to their wishes while

simultaneously keeping an eye on reality: What is the person capable of, which jobs are available in the area, what would be the timeframe of such an investment?



## **Different professional cultures (Chapter 6)**

- Caseworker **networking**:
  - Dutch caseworkers are very active networkers.
    Reasons: Devolution, budget cuts; national culture?
  - Caseworker networks help to broaden the service range, improve organizational routines, and possibly increase placement rates/the sustainability of employment
  - But: Potential downsides: time-consuming; bound to individual caseworkers – what if they leave...?

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Tab. 6.1: Ins	tances of insti	tutional agenc	ry among cases	workers in set	ven Dutch jobo	centres.
Α	В	С	D	Е	F	G
		Developir	ng organization	al routines		
Procedure	Procedure		Voice in	Procedure	Procedure	Procedure
development	development		proc. development	development	development	development
		Procuring/dev	eloping activati	ion instrument	5	
In-/formal procurement	Formal procurement				Informal procurement	
Conceptual development		Conceptual development	Conceptual development			
		Ν	lanagement tas	ks		
Account management	Budget/ account management			Account management		Budget management
Legal advisory function		Advisory function	Advisory function		Advisory function	
			Trainer tasks			
		Immigrant		Application	Application	Application/
		summer course		trainings	trainings	psych. trainings
		Exter	nal network rel	lations		
	Provider relations			Provider relations	Provider relations	Provider relations
Employer relations	Employer relations	Employer relations	Employer relations	Employer relations	Employer relations	Employer relations
Professional relations: UWV			Professional relations: UWV	Professional relations: UWV	Professional relations: UWV	Professional relations: UWV
Professional relations: Other	Professional relations: Other	Professional relations: Other	Professional relations: Other		Professional relations: Other	Professional relations: Other



Н	Ι	J	K	L	Μ
	1	Developing or	ganizational routi	nes	
			Procedure development		
		Manag	gement tasks		
Account					
nanagement ssistance					
			Advisory	Advisory	
			function	function	
		Tra	iner tasks		
			Group counselling		
		External n	etwork relations		
			Provider relations	Provider relations	
					Employer re- lations
rofessional			Professional		
elations: other			relations: other	r	

Tab. 6.2: Instances of institutional agency among caseworkers in six Danish jobcentres.



## Lessons learned (2)

- Also (national, political, administrative) **culture** shapes activation practices, e.g. regarding
  - which life problems are seen as relevant for employment, such as (child) care responsibilities
  - whether service resources are invested evenly or selectively
  - whether caseworkers act only as administrative professionals or also as institutional entrepreneurs
- Is one system better than the other? Not really a matter of **political choice** and priorities



#### References

- Rice, D. (2015). *Building active welfare states: How policy shapes caseworker practice*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.
- Rice, D. (2017). How governance conditions affect the individualization of active labour market services: An exploratory vignette study. *Public Administration* 95(2), 468-481.