

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) → incentive games	Reimbursement of reintegration trajectories depending on timing and type of intervention → '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)





Jobcentres:	Netherlands													Σ	ø	%	Denmark												Σ	ø	%
	Caseworkers:																I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	I	II	III	IV	V			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12						
Job search: Individual efforts														26	2.0	46													10	0.8	27
Working more hours	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•									•				1					
Finding new job	•	•		•				•	•			•		•				•				•	•	•		5					
Finding second part-time job				•	•			•	•	•																0					
Seeking promotion						•	•																			0					
Turning hobby into job												•														0					
Keeping part-time job																		•		•				•		3					
Moving to another city														•												1					
Job search: Institutional offers														3	0.2	5													7	0.6	19
Job placement/counselling	•			•												•	•	•	•		•	•	•			7					
Application training										•																0					
Work experience														4	0.3	7													8	0.7	22
Wage subsidy	•							•								•	•		•	•						4					
Internship								•						•						•	•					3					
Public work programme									•																	0					
Mentor (on the job)																			•							1					
Education and training														17	1.3	30													12	1.0	32
Language / writing course	•				•		•				•	•	•			•			•	•			•	•		5					
Authentication of BA diploma			•				•	•		•				•										•		2					
Secondary/tertiary education						•	•			•				•	•											2					
Training				•	•				•										•							1					
Writing test																•										1					
Primary education																								•		1					
EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (TOTAL)														50	3.9	89													37	3.1	100
SOCIAL SERVICES														6	0.5	11													0	0	0
Child care	•			•			•			•		•	•													6					
TOTAL														56	4.3	100*													37	3.1	100

* Differences due to rounding

FIGURE 1 Caseworker responses to the vignette Emina Mujačić

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 investment-orientated’ 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

Quotes
from NL:

- NL

- The basis: Making a connection
- Invoking rational interests
- Invoking social responsibilities
- Unearthing 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

- DK

- The basis: Talking procedures
- Talking education
- Talking (job) mobility
- Invoking rational interests
- Invoking social norms
- Invoking personal visions and dreams
- Encouraging concrete actions

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 things that give them less pleasure. You need that, don't you. If you don't know what you're doing it for, you're not going to succeed.

Wow, that must have been hard for you – but what are 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...?

Tab. 6.1: Instances of institutional agency among caseworkers in seven Dutch jobcentres.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Developing organizational routines						
Procedure development	Procedure development		Voice in proc. development	Procedure development	Procedure development	Procedure development
Procuring/developing activation instruments						
In-/formal procurement	Formal procurement				Informal procurement	
Conceptual development		Conceptual development	Conceptual development			
Management tasks						
Account management	Budget/account management			Account management		Budget management
Legal advisory function		Advisory function	Advisory function		Advisory function	
Trainer tasks						
		Immigrant summer course		Application trainings	Application trainings	Application/psych. trainings
External network relations						
	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

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

H	I	J	K	L	M
		Developing organizational routines			
			Procedure development		
		Management tasks			
Account management assistance			Advisory function	Advisory function	
		Trainer tasks			
			Group counselling		
		External network relations			
			Provider relations	Provider relations	
					Employer re- lations
Professional relations: other			Professional relations: other		

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.