

# **The pressure of professionalism. The case of Dutch activation workers.**

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**Panel 33. Pressure Management and Frontline Supervision in Street-Level Bureaucracies**

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## Authors

### **Paul van der Aa**

Researcher

Municipality of Rotterdam, department of Social Affairs and Employment (SoZaWe)

Phd-student, Utrecht University School of Governance

PO Box 1024, 3000 BA Rotterdam, The Netherlands

phj.vanderaa@rotterdam.nl

### **Rik van Berkel**

Associate Professor

Utrecht University School of Governance

Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC Utrecht, The Netherlands

r.vanberkel@uu.nl

## **Introduction**

Understanding the way in which frontline workers deliver public services in practice is paramount to understanding the way social policy actually plays out (Brodkin 2011). Their decision making influences who gets what, how and when and as such gives them a political role (Lipsky 1980). This is very much related to the room for autonomous decision making that frontline workers have in their daily work. Whereas the delivery of some public services is seen as requiring only limited discretionary decision making and a mainly administrative process, in other public services workers are deliberately granted autonomy because their work is considered to be 'professional'. Ideal typically, this autonomy should enable them to apply their expertise and professional norms to make 'just' decisions (Mashaw 1983) regarding service delivery (Freidson 2001; Mintzberg 2006).

However, what is considered to be 'professional' may be contested and, as we will see, the same goes for the issue whether the delivery of public services requires professionals in the first place. Moreover, street-level research shows that professional considerations may not be the only or most important driver in decision making. Therefore, insight in the role of professionalism vis-à-vis other pressures in actual street-level practice is an important aspect of understanding how and why frontline workers act the way they do.

In the extensive debate on the changing role of professionalism in frontline work that has been going on during the last decades (Abbott 1988; Evetts 2003; Exworthy and Halford 1999; Kirkpatrick et al 2005; Noordegraaf 2011) the focus was on more or less established professions and the ways in which frontline workers in these professions deal with pressures like increasing managerial power, bureaucratisation or consumer influence. Often these pressures are interpreted as triggering processes of de-professionalisation due to greater 'state control' and less self-regulation, because established professional standards have to compete with other ('non-professional') norms for decision making. Some authors (Evetts 2003; Kirkpatrick et al 2005; Noordegraaf 2011), however, develop a more dynamic view on professions: the changes mentioned above should not be interpreted as jeopardizing the conditions for working professionally (which is what the de-professionalisation thesis implies), but as debates about the very meaning of professionalism and acting as a professional. Thus, instead of interpreting managerial demands as being external to professionals, they describe examples where professional standards incorporate these kinds of demands. From this perspective, professions are adapting their standards to new organisational demands which we could call a kind of 're-professionalisation'.

In this paper, we will adopt a dynamic view on professions as well, although we take a somewhat different starting point. Rather than focusing on *established* professions and the changes they are subjected to, we look at the role of professionalism in *newly emerging* types of frontline public service work and what Kirkpatrick et al (2005) called professionalisation projects. We will argue that including newly emerging lines of frontline work in the debates on professionalism and professionalisation projects adds to a more diversified understanding of the role of professionalism in contemporary street-level practice.

More specifically, we will show how for workers in these new types of work, professionalism potentially poses four pressures that they will have to deal with. The first pressure is the contested professional nature of the work as such: it may not be self evident that service delivery requires a professional logic. The second pressure originates in the process of defining what constitutes the core of their new profession. In this process they will also have

to relate to the established professions: by definition, 'new' professions do not completely fit the expertise and 'jurisdiction' (Abbott 1988) of existing professions. Thirdly, of course, workers will have to relate to general street-level pressures like managerialism, consumer influence, limited resources as well. Finally, taken together the former pressures lead to (new) accountability pressures regarding decision making in frontline practices.

We will develop this argument by looking at a specific type of new frontline work, activation work. Activation consists of the provision of services aimed at promoting the reintegration of unemployed people depending on benefits into the labour market. Depending on the (national) policy context in which they work, activation workers were traditional benefit administrators whose work used to be highly focused on the application of detailed policy rules and regulations; or they were social workers with a much more clearly established and institutionalised professional status. At the same time, all activation workers are confronted with the fact that their new profession is still on shaky grounds, as it lacks the status, legitimacy and institutional grounding that 'established' professions can more or less rely on.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, based on a literature survey we will elaborate on the pressures related to the role of professionalism in new lines of frontline work in general and activation work in particular. Next we will present empirical data about how these issues work out in a specific context, the delivery of activation to social assistance claimants in Dutch municipalities. The paper concludes with a discussion on these findings.

### **Pressures of professionalism in new lines of frontline work**

A focus on the role of professionalism in new frontline work reveals a number of specific pressures workers have to deal with, while 'old' issues remain important as well. In this section we will explore these pressures and illustrate them by using activation work as a relevant example.

First of all, the claim that new types of frontline work require professionalism won't be uncontested and will raise debates concerning the actual nature and the core of daily frontline work: what are frontline workers supposed to do, what are they actually doing and why are professionalism and street-level autonomy considered to be necessary? In studies on established professions, this issue is hardly raised because the required professional nature of the work as such as well as professional methods are more or less taken for granted. Thus, not much attention is paid to the nature of the professional work as such. For new lines of work the (required) nature of the work will be less self-evident, which makes them suitable cases for illustrating the contested nature of professionalism as well as for the

development of professionalisation projects. It requires attention for the contested core of the methods for service delivery.

Changing social policies are an important trigger of debates concerning the required nature of frontline work responsible for implementing these policies, as well as of debates concerning the issues whether or not implementing these policies requires professional work. Generally speaking, policy makers may consider professional service delivery to be necessary when dealing with complex, wicked social problems that require expert and individualized attention and the use of 'people changing technologies' that aim for changes in personal attributes and capabilities (Clarke and Newman 1997; Hasenfeld 1983; Vinzant and Crothers 1998). Activation work is a clear example of this. The introduction of activation programmes and services is a consequence of changing social policies. Whether or not activation work is, or should be, professional work is highly contested.

Research on activation work shows that many authors consider a number of aspects of activation work to require professional judgement (Van Berkel and Van der Aa 2012). Authors like Adler (2008), Jewell (2007) and Sainsbury (2008) for example consider the core logic of activation work to be 'professional' for various reasons: it often consists of personal advice to unemployed people, it uses a 'case work' methodology for individualised 'treatment' of complex problems related to unemployment and is often directed at changing behaviour and attitudes of unemployed people. At the same time, several studies on Welfare-to-Work in the US show that the organisation of activation work as professional work is certainly not self-evident. Although activation work is often delivered by professional social workers, policy regulations, bureaucratic organisation of the work and managerial imperatives make it a more bureaucratic function in actual practice and severely limit professional delivery (Brodin 2006; Hasenfeld 1999; Jewell 2007; Johnson Dias and Maynard-Moody 2006).

What complicates the debate is that specific work characteristics cannot unambiguously be interpreted as indications of professional or administrative work. Authors like Wright (2003) argue that processes of standardizing work by introducing guidelines or instruments (for example for profiling clients) or paper work are clear indications of the primarily bureaucratic nature of activation work and do not fit in a professional way of working. Behnke et al. (2007) on the other hand maintain that these instruments can also be used to support professional decision making.

Secondly, even when the professional nature of the 'new' work is acknowledged, there is the issue what kind of professional standards are considered to be suitable for doing the work,

how these relate to existing professions and whether the claim of a 'new' profession can be made. In other words, new lines of professional work focus attention on the fact that professional standards are not a static, self evident body of knowledge and skills but may be subject to discussion and change. Basically this comes down to the questions which professional standards are considered to be 'legitimate' and adequate and which credentials workers applying these standards (should) have.

Studies on activation show that – depending on local contexts and prior history of frontline work – several types of developments may occur.

In situations where the former frontline work already had professional characteristics, the 'jurisdiction' of these professionals may become compromised because of new demands being put on the workers. For example, a number of studies identify social work as the profession of traditional frontline work in the delivery of welfare. However, the professional standards of traditional social work do not combine easily with the standardisation and disciplining nature of many activation policy contexts (Hasenfeld 1999; Thorén 2008). This can mean that workers experience de-professionalisation because they cannot apply their professional standards (Thorén 2008). It may also require them to adapt their professional standards to new demands, a kind of re-professionalisation (Jørgensen et al 2010; Kjørstad 2006). Alternatively, it may drive managers to look for other professionals than social workers because they are supposed to have better credentials for doing activation work (Ridzi 2004).

A relevant example in this context concerns the use of financial sanctions, which most activation policy contexts allow for given the obligatory nature of activation and its relation to benefit delivery. A number of authors such as Soss et al (2011) and Thorén (2008) consider this use of coercive authority (Marston et al 2005) alien to (social work based) professional service delivery and as primarily serving organisational goals. Marston et al (2005) as well as Kjørstad (2006) however discuss the possibility of differential use of sanctions for more methodological, professional reasons, serving the activation goal which is aspired.

Yet another situation occurs when frontline workers formerly had a more administrative, bureaucratic function focussed on benefit delivery (Van Berkel et al 2010; Sainsbury 2008), and now gain autonomy to deliver activation services. In these cases the issue is how frontline workers can become 'more professional' and what kind of professionalism is considered to be suitable. Thus, the focus is directed at professionalisation projects.

Thirdly, the development of new lines of professional frontline work of course does not mean that organisational pressures identified in studies on established professionals and street-

level bureaucracies are no longer relevant. Thus, it is important to understand how pressures on street-level practice coming from both policy as well as organisational choices shape the professional nature of 'new frontline work'. With regards to activation work scholars like Jewell (2007) and Thorén (2008) show that policy choices regarding standardisation, differentiation and centralized regulation of services influence autonomy at the shop floor. Regarding organisational choices, an important issue proves to be the way in which NPM-inspired management techniques such as target-setting are introduced: many authors find that these techniques put a pressure on professional decision-making, although the impact does not seem to be equivocal (Morgen 2001; Riccucci and Lurie 2001). A robust finding from street-level research throughout the years that has to be taken into account is the role of high workloads. Jewell (2007) for example shows that different activation policy contexts may still lead to comparable street-level practices because of high caseloads and the resulting informal strategies.

Fourthly, the three types of pressures potentially accumulate into new accountability pressures on frontline workers regarding their use of autonomy. On the one hand, the contested nature or absence of clear professional standards raise the question whether and how frontline workers account for their autonomous decision making. For activation, this is observed by Van Berkel et al (2010) and Sainsbury (2008). They notice that workers do deliver activation in a professional way, but without clear and accepted professional standards. On the other hand, organisational pressures may compromise the possibilities to apply their professional standards or may influence the development of these standards. Thus, workers will be forced to use their autonomy to deal with these pressures instead of making 'legitimate' professional decisions. Regarding activation, this is illustrated by Sainsbury (2008) and Thorén (2008) who notice that application of professional norms is hampered by organisational pressures like time limits on service delivery and, again, high caseloads.

### **Activation work in Dutch social assistance as a new type of frontline work**

In the rest of this paper we will illustrate how these pressures work out in practice by presenting empirical data from a study on frontline practices of activation workers in social assistance agencies in the Netherlands. Dutch activation work provides a case in which civil servants who were formerly primarily engaged in administrative work have gained autonomy to deliver activation work. This autonomy has been made possible by governance choices that have resulted in little central regulation regarding activation and its delivery. Moreover, a policy discourse that regards activation work as professional work is gaining momentum.

Dutch social assistance<sup>1</sup> is the last resort, means-tested social security provision for income protection which is currently being delivered to around 350,000 households. Although it is a national law which determines benefits levels centrally<sup>2</sup>, its implementation has always been decentralized to the municipal level. This is especially true for the delivery of activation services, that have gained importance over the last decade as part of a general strategy aimed at developing a more activating welfare state (Van Berkel 2006).

National regulation regarding the organisation or nature of these services hardly exists. Municipalities can decide for themselves how to organize these services and whether to outsource them to private re-integration companies or not. The flipside of this local autonomy is a system of strong financial steering from the national level on local activation results by means of budgeting benefit expenses. This NPM-inspired, technically complex system means that municipalities that do not succeed in reducing the number of people on benefits sufficiently, have to finance benefits from municipal funds. Thus, decreasing dependency on benefit is the main target for local activation policy. Nevertheless, at least until the recent economic crisis many municipalities also embraced broader objectives, such as participation in voluntary work for people who are considered to have lesser probability of finding paid work.

This context leaves room for municipalities to organize activation as either a professional or an administrative function. Municipalities can choose to organize activation by means of strict local policy regulations for service delivery, or they can choose to give frontline workers autonomy for a more professional mode of implementation. Although a complete overview of all municipalities is not available, several studies suggest that many municipalities do organize the work as a kind of new professional function with autonomy for the workers (Van Berkel et al 2010; Polstra 2011; Van Zandvliet et al 2011).

This professionalisation project is taking place in a context where there is no institutionalised profession that has been able to claim expertise in the field of activation. In addition, the Netherlands differs from countries like Sweden, Norway and the US: whereas in these countries activation work is predominantly done by social workers, most Dutch activation workers have a background in benefit administration rather than in the provision of social services, most of which are provided by other agencies than local welfare agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> In Dutch: WWB, Wet Werk en Bijstand.

<sup>2</sup> Within a certain bandwidth municipalities can determine the level of supplements in addition to the basic allowance.

Furthermore, the professionalisation project takes place against the background of significant cuts in the budgets available for activation. Nevertheless, a national policy discourse stresses the professional nature of activation work, by emphasizing the need for tailor-made approaches and the complexity of activation processes. Since 2010 the Ministry for social affairs and employment has been stimulating various initiatives towards professionalisation of activation work, which are partly induced by critical studies on the effectiveness of activation (Divosa 2011). This context makes Dutch activation work a relevant case for studying the role of professionalism and professionalisation in the delivery of new frontline work.

### **Research design**

Empirical data for this paper stems from a PhD-study (Van der Aa, forthcoming) on activation service delivery by frontline workers in municipal social assistance agencies in three large Dutch cities. In 2010, together these cities delivered social assistance to 83,000 households or 27% of all Dutch households on social assistance. A qualitative multi-site case study design (Silverman 2010) was used because of the exploratory nature of the study. Street-level practices of activation workers have hardly been studied in the Netherlands until now. These three municipalities do not represent a statistical representative sample of all Dutch municipalities. Nevertheless, findings reported in several other publications (Van Zandvliet et al 2011) indicate that patterns found in this study are also visible in other municipalities.

Research techniques consisted of semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with frontline workers and observation of their interactions with clients. Basically these interviews were centred around the open question: how do you do activation work and why do you do it like that? An item list based on both street-level bureaucracy and professionalism literature structured these conversations. Fieldwork was done in 2010. 70 frontline workers were interviewed and 25 meetings with clients were observed. The interviews concentrated on the way the workers described their working methods and ways of decision making. The discussions in the focus groups proved to be a good way to make similarities and differences between workers more explicit. The observations were used to study interactions with clients in practice, but also to triangulate the findings from the interviews. Also policy documents were studied and 25 managers and policy advisors were interviewed to map the policy and organisational context of the frontline workers. Analysis was done in an iterative process of coding, interpreting interview fragments and searching for general patterns in street-level reasoning about decision making.

## **The pressures of professionalism in Dutch activation practice**

### *Activation work between administration and professional service delivery*

The first pressure we identified is the contested professional nature of the work as such. To elaborate on this pressure, we take a closer look on the way frontline workers in our study were delivering their activation services and what was considered to be professional about it.

The activation work of the frontline workers in this study consisted of various activities that were meant to stimulate clients in their caseload to find work or, under certain conditions, to engage in voluntary work. Basically, the service process could consist of the following activities:

- the assessment of the 'activation problem' and determining a 'personal activation plan';
- selecting an externally delivered activation programme and organizing the referral to that programme;
- monitoring the progress of the external programme;
- coaching and advising the clients regarding activation;
- realising job placements;
- applying sanctions in case of non compliance with activation services;
- various administrative tasks.

The exact mix of these activities was not the same for all workers because of organisational choices regarding specialisation within the agencies. All three agencies specialized the activation work along the lines of target groups in terms of expected chances to find work: the 'easy' to place, a middle group and the hardest to place in work. For each target group different activation services were made available. Some workers had to rely on external programmes, others were supposed to activate the clients themselves, a third group could use a mix of external programmes and services provided by themselves. Also, some frontline workers had to administrate benefits besides being responsible for activation, whereas the others could solely focus on activation. Moreover, the caseload for each specialisation varied. Variety along these lines not only existed when comparing the organisations, but also at the intra-organisational level: the agencies apparently felt that the nature of activation work partly depends on the kind of target group being activated, which adds another layer of complexity to discussions on the role of professionalism.

Frontline workers had to comply with a few types of local regulation. Global guidelines regulated what kind of activation services were available for certain target groups. Also, the height of financial sanctions and sanctionable behaviour were regulated by local by-law, although the descriptions of behaviour were very general and open to interpretation.

Within the confines of these general guidelines and organisational choices, workers had various levels of autonomy to decide for themselves how to deliver activation services. The actual implementation of these activities demonstrates a number of relevant aspects regarding the role and development of professionalism in activation work.

First of all, our data suggests that the role of professionalism in new frontline work is related to the level of differentiation or individualisation of services that is desired. A greater focus on individualisation increases the necessity for professional decision making about service provision. This point can be illustrated by looking at the start of activation: the determination of activation goals and the contents of the subsequent services.

In several other studies like those of Wright (2003) and Thorén (2008) these activities have been described as predominantly bureaucratic selection based on standard procedures and little room for differentiation and individualisation. Our study confirms this finding for one group of activation workers, namely workers who because of organisational choices had to make use of external programmes and could only choose between two programmes. They did not feel involved at all with the activation services for their clients and focussed on administrating the referrals. Most of their time was dedicated to the administration of benefits. Thus, limited choice in combination with outsourcing of services created a merely bureaucratic activation function:

*W1201: Our basic task is to keep benefit delivery running. Of course, the idea was that we would speak often to clients, give them suggestions about how to find work. But in practice, we are not involved in activation services. We refer clients and that's it.*

The other activation workers however had quite some autonomy to decide what the activation process should look like. The activation workers that primarily used external activation programmes could choose from a variety of programmes that in their eyes offered sufficient variation. General guidelines for matching clients with programmes left sufficient room for workers to choose a programme based on their assessment of the client. More

over, in two municipalities they could propose alternative programmes outside the standard programmes if these were considered more adequate. The workers that provided activation services themselves could individualize their guidance almost completely: they only had to reckon with a maximum duration of their guidance. Thus, they could determine how often they wanted to see clients, which assignments they would give clients (elaborating a curriculum vitae, applying for jobs) and whether they would contact employers themselves.

In these cases many workers delivered the assessment as a kind of (professional) 'diagnosis' that for example Sainsbury (2008) describes. Many workers described the assessment process and the decision concerning activation services as being professional and tried to individualize services in relation to the activation goal. Motivating the client was seen as an essential aspect of activation work:

*W0302: You cannot refer clients after one contact. Various meetings are needed to motivate them, they are shocked that they are supposed to become active after all these years.*

*W0203: Every client is different. One may need control and discipline, the other needs support or contacts with employers. Service is tailor-made. You cannot say one size fits all.*

However, granting autonomy did not automatically lead to frontline practices of individualized service provision. Thus, we also found activation workers who used global guidelines to offer services in a bureaucratic, standardized way. In a way, these workers evaded the pressure of professionalism by sticking to their old administrative way of working:

*W0902: As a matter of speaking, when a client says he likes coconut or kiwi, I say: i know that you like that. But I can only offer you pear, apple or banana.*

These workers moreover often emphasized the obligatory nature of activation, regardless of the contribution activation could make to finding work.

Secondly, new lines of frontline work may consist of activities which are seen as alien to established professions. However, this does not mean they are to be considered as 'non-professional': this depends on the way these activities fit in a broader professional logic of delivering the services. In the above, we pointed at the contested nature of the use of sanctions as a relevant example: is this an administrative activity, or can it be part of a

professional repertoire? Our study corresponds more with the latter perspective. Most workers considered the use of sanctions as a 'professional tool' that they only used when they felt that it contributed to achieving activation results. Most workers considered applying sanctions as a measure of last resort. They described that they tried to approach clients in a supportive way first. When clients did not comply they would start issuing warnings about possible sanctions. After that they could actually apply sanctions, which in practice did not happen very often. When they felt sanctions would have a detrimental effect for clients, they would not apply them even when clients broke certain rules or agreements about activation:

*W0603: Some of my clients could be sanctioned all the time, but this would cause more financial misery, so I use other tools. I refer them to specialized care facilities.*

Others used sanctions as a kind of 'pedagogic instrument' to literally activate certain clients and to enforce compliance with activation services:

*W0503: Some clients just need a sanction to wake up, to understand that things don't work like that. Some clients think they can fool me, they try to dominate me. You have to be clear that you are serious [about activation]*

Again, however, not all frontline workers worked this way. Some of them had a more bureaucratic way of applying sanctions and did abide by the rules regardless of the impact on clients. In those cases, clients were not confronted with professional service providers, but with bureaucrats following the rules. Within neither category however we found workers administering sanctions only to comply with organisational goals. As such, the Dutch activation context appears to be 'softer' than Welfare-to-Work in the US.

Thirdly, the case study shows that new frontline work may contain both professional as well as administrative elements which are not always easy to discern. Moreover, organisational pressures may determine whether certain tasks are delivered in a professional or a administrative way. Of course this complicates discussions about professional standards in relation to administrative requirements that the work may also pose.

The monitoring of clients in external activation programmes is an example of this. Traditionally, the core of professional service has been mainly described as social interactions between service provider and his subject (Hasenfeld 1983). Changes in governance of social policies however may have increased the need for co-operation in

service delivery between service providers due to divisions of labour within the service process (Hill and Hupe 2009).

In our study case workers who did not activate clients themselves were supposed to monitor the progress of clients in external programmes and keep in touch with external service providers. In practice, under pressure of organisational conditions they fulfilled these tasks predominantly in a bureaucratic way: they administratively filed quarterly reports from external providers, but claimed they had no time to communicate with service providers about their services and possible adaptations. By consequence, they often lost oversight of external trajectories. However, they felt this was undesirable because of professional reasons and preferred to stay in touch, both with clients as well as with service providers.

*W0301: We receive status reports from re-integration companies and we have to keep in touch with clients. But caseloads are too high to keep oversight on all clients.*

Related to this point is the fact that workers had a lot of paper work to do. On the one hand, this paper work could be interpreted as a part of the professional work, to effectively deliver 'case management'. But in practice, a great deal of the paper work was the result of both complex administrative procedures regarding referrals to external programmes as well as of the organisational pressure to be accountable for decisions being made.

Summing up, the implementation of activation work in these agencies consisted of both professional as well as administrative elements. Moreover, workers dealt differently with the autonomy they had: some used autonomy to offer 'professional treatment', others followed a more bureaucratic logic in dealing with their clients. This can partly be understood by two other important dimensions that shaped the nature of new frontline work: first of all, the absence of general professional standards for activation and secondly, the organisational context that did not unambiguously support professional service delivery.

#### *The status of professional standards for activation work*

As was discussed earlier the development of new types of professional frontline work puts (the legitimacy of) professional standards on the agenda. The fact that workers gain (some) professional autonomy does not automatically mean that there is consensus about the professional standards they are supposed to use. Thus, workers face the pressure of having to act professional in a context of contested or absent standards.

In our case professional standards for activation were virtually absent, comparable to observations made by Sainsbury (2008) and Fletcher (2011). As was mentioned before institutionalisation of activation work was almost non-existent. The workers themselves had very different educational backgrounds and work experience. By consequence, workers had to base their 'professional' judgements mainly on individual norms, earlier professional experience and on practice based experiences with earlier service trajectories. This led to differentiation in practices that was not grounded in shared standards or methods for individualisation.

Again, the use of sanctions can illustrate this point. Workers who used sanctions in a professional way, agreed to disagree about the usefulness of this 'tool' and acknowledged that this led to differences in practice:

*W0503: I think we treat people who refuse to work in different ways. Some will engage in conversations to find out why someone refuses. And others will immediately refer them to a work-first project.*

*W0204: Of course you may sanction people, and again, and again. But in the end you cannot match unmotivated people with employers, because they will say: I don't want these welfare clients anymore. So, in the end motivating people is what works best*

*W0404: Personally I think we are not harsh enough. You have to be clear cut. If you don't work hard enough, you get a sanction. If it happens again, I cut your allowance completely. But that way of working is not supported by our management... But I know what it is like, I am the same. If I don't feel like doing things and I have room to do so, I won't do it.*

Another example of varied norms was the influence clients could have in determining the contents of services. Some workers adhered to the norm that some (but not all) clients were sufficiently capable of determining their own activation route:

*W1003: When clients are young, they say they want to look for work on their own, I give them three months to look for work themselves. But they do have to show application letters every two weeks.*

Others did not think this made much sense:

*W0604: The client can have influence, but practice teaches us that our clients don't know what they want and don't show initiative. They put it on our plate [to make decisions].*

As a result, the absence of professional standards in combination with autonomy for the workers led to a rather peculiar form of street-level practice. On the one hand, the nature of the service process required professional decision making about activation: it was not a merely bureaucratic function. On the other hand, the absence of standards created a way of working that was highly individual and was not based in professional claims with a strong 'jurisdiction'.

#### *Organisational pressures*

Finally, our study offers insight in the way organisational pressures shape the practice of (new) professional work regardless of professional standards. Of course, these are issues well known from the literature on street-level bureaucracies, but they have not lost importance. Specifically, we will focus on two major organisational choices that affected the way the workers used their autonomy: the use of output steering, and the caseloads of workers.

All agencies opted for less regulation, more autonomy *and* output steering as ways of coordinating activation work. All frontline workers had targets concerning the number of placements in jobs without further qualifications. Some of them also had targets concerning the number of activation plans they had to realise.

Contrary to some other studies (Morgen 2001; Ridzi 2004; Thorén 2008) output steering on job placements did not appear to influence decision making in a substantial way: the pressure of this npm-instrument was rather limited. On the one hand, case workers found their targets to be easily achievable without special efforts.

*W0303: I don't really focus on my targets and I still realise sufficient placements in work, so I don't really care. I am behind on the target of referrals to other services, but I have explained [to the management] that I rather keep clients to myself if I can place them myself.*

More over, they noticed nothing serious happened when they didn't meet there targets. Also they didn't have big professional issues with these targets, because they considered it to be their professional job to get people to work. On the other hand, some workers did

acknowledge they focussed less on placement on sustainable jobs than they found desirable: instead, they stimulated quick job placements, also when this involved short time, insecure jobs, for example with tender agencies.

The targets on activation plans, which were strictly monitored by the management, did have a major impact, especially with the workers that referred clients to external programmes. Case workers were supposed to realise an activation plan with 80-90% of their clients. These targets stimulated the more administrative way of monitoring activation plans and external providers, in favour of realising sufficient activation plans. In effect, this meant that professional attention was mainly focussed on starting the services, but the actual delivery of activation often was more or less neglected. It could also lead to 'empty plans' without any delivery of services:

*W0603: When I have a target of 100 more activation plans, I focus on clients that don't have a plan yet. They have to have a plan. If a client is 63 years old, you can say: he won't do anything anymore. Then you can make a plan that says: until he is 65, he won't do anything anymore. Then the plan is registered.*

Both findings indicate that output steering and professionalism in frontline work are not 'natural opposites', but a lot depends on the way in which targets are defined and realisation of targets is being monitored.

In line with other studies on activation (Jewell 1997; Morgen 2001; Wright 2003) high caseloads proved to be another major factor influencing the nature of the actual frontline practice. Caseloads varied substantially between frontline workers, from 55 until 300 clients. More over, caseloads tended to change over time, which complicated workload management. High caseloads (over 100 clients) posed pressures for various reasons: they made the target to realise activation plans harder, they increased the amount of paper work and limited the possibilities to meet with clients after the assessment. As a result frontline workers had to 'ration' their professional attention for clients, even when they judged more attention was useful:

*W1006: When your caseload consists of 180 clients, you are glad when there are no problems. So when a report from the re-integration company arrives which asks for a longer trajectory, you approve even if you think the client is ready for a next step and should be invited for a meeting (..) The system is organised in a way that you are glad when you don't hear from clients. I think that is a bad thing.*

On the other hand, low caseloads made it easier for frontline workers to work according to their standards for doing activation work.

*W0101: With a lower caseload, we have more time to take these people [clients] by the hand. And that is really what you have to do.*

## **Discussion**

In this paper we have explored pressures of professionalism in new lines of frontline work, using activation work as an example. We have explored several types of pressures: the insecure professional status of new work, contested and developing professional standards and organisational pressures.

This exploration has shown that professionalism in public services is not always 'on the retreat' in favour of other types of coordination. New frontline work may require (re-)professionalisation projects and workers may deliberately be granted autonomy to achieve professional service which can deal with complex social problems. This focuses the debate on the dynamic core and methods of frontline work in relation to the broader context of social policy, organisations and established professional groups in which workers act. It requires a dynamic view on and definition of what is professional and what is not. Therefore, we think new types of frontline work such as activation offer a relevant object of study to increase the understanding of the dynamics of contemporary professionalism and professional decision making.

The pressures that have been explored sum up to accountability pressures. They make it difficult for workers to determine how to make the 'right' professional decisions but also how to justify these decisions. Sometimes the context won't allow them to make the professional decisions they think are right. Since they have an imperative to act (Hill and Hupe 2007) they will decide and act. The pressures that have been identified can however lead to rather unpredictable, opaque and sometimes clumsy ways of delivering services. Workers may rely on traditional street-level strategies to control their client and workload. They also may sincerely think they are making professionally justified decisions, even if that claim can hardly be substantiated. Acting professionally and being responsible for professional decisions thus becomes a highly individualised enterprise. In this situation, more autonomy may become problematic: not only for the workers, but also for the clients who depend on their decisions and – in the case of activation – are obliged to accept their services.

This study also suggests that organisational choices matter a lot with regards to the way in which room for professional frontline work is actually used. Managing professionalism in new frontline work may be complicated when there is no consensus about the nature of the work. At the same time, this study shows that certain managerial choices regarding caseloads or output steering increase the unpredictability of decision making at the frontline rather than supporting (new) professionalism. Therefore, a political or managerial 'choice' for more professionalism in frontline work does not self evidently lead to an accountable 'solution' for dealing with autonomy at the frontline of public services. It requires both support for professionalisation projects as well as careful use of managerial instruments. Transcending the individual standards for professional decision making would be an important goal in this process.

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