

1 The Frontline Delivery of Welfare-to-Work in Context

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The Study of Frontline Policy Implementation

This book starts with the notion that the frontline delivery of public policies cannot simply be interpreted as a technical process of implementing laws, rules and regulations issued by governments. Both the policy implementation literature and the literature on street-level bureaucracies or street-level organizations have convincingly argued that policy implementation is part of the policymaking process (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Hill & Hupe, 2002; Hupe & Buffat, 2015) and, put in a somewhat provocative way, that street-level bureaucrats themselves are policy makers (Lipsky, 2010). Despite considerable debate about attempts to curtail discretion and to influence the ways in which discretion is used, for example, by new public management instruments such as performance management (Brodkin, 2006; Evans & Harris, 2004; Jessen & Tufte, 2014), few researchers will deny that frontline workers continue to exercise discretion and to contribute to making policies. From a more positive point of view, frontline workers *need* discretion in policy implementation, especially when they are expected to deliver personalized services to their clients in policy contexts where people-changing interventions are required (Hasenfeld, 2010).

These insights have been important for scholars interested in public policies. First, studying formal policies can only provide us with a partial understanding of what policies ‘are’ and look like in practice, and what they ‘do’ with the people at which they are targeted. From a somewhat different point of view, it can be argued that explaining the results and outcomes of policies cannot merely refer to formal policies but also needs to look at how formal policies are actually being delivered by the agencies and workers responsible for their implementation. This implies opening up the ‘black box’ of policy implementation or what Brodkin (see Chapter 3) calls the ‘missing middle’ in policy analysis.

Second, acknowledging the role of street-level or frontline workers in the ‘production’ of policies also includes acknowledging their role in the policy process. As Brodkin (2013) has argued, the workers involved in the delivery of policies are not merely policy implementers and administrators. They are also mediators of *policies* in the sense that they transform formal policies into policy practices, and in doing so, they ‘make’ these policies; they are mediators of *politics* in the sense that this

transformation process, especially when policies are ambiguous or inconsistent, makes frontline decisions and interpretations political (also see Chapter 3). Depending on the role that scholars of frontline work focus on, the relevance of studying frontline work can be formulated in different ways. From a more traditional frontline-workers-as-policy-implementers perspective, the issue arises whether or not policies are actually implemented at the frontline. This perspective is dominant in studies of implementation failure or implementation gaps and has received quite some attention in the US, also in the policy area that this book focuses on: welfare-to-work or activation policies (for example, Meyers, Glaser & Donald, 1998). From the perspective that frontline workers are mediators of policies, frontline studies analyse how the process of policy making continues while policies are delivered at the frontlines. In this context the questions arise how frontline workers contribute to shaping how the policies they implement look like in practice and how these policies-as-implemented impact the target groups of these policies (see Chapter 2). Finally, studies focusing attention on frontline workers as mediators of politics look at frontline work as a setting where political decisions are made and political struggle and conflict take place. For example, these studies look at individual or collective resistance of workers against elements of their work or the policies they deliver (for example, Prior & Barnes, 2011). However, the political nature of frontline work in most cases is not something that develops from frontline workers' own volition. Instead, acting as mediator of politics is an unavoidable element of the job frontline workers do, irrespective of whether or not they *intend* to act politically. Policies often are ambiguous or contain conflicting problem definitions and goals so that policy delivery and frontline agency become part of the arena where problems are defined and solutions developed. This is not an issue of frontline workers' (dis)loyalty but part of the job of delivering policies.

Third, recognizing the important role of frontline workers does not mean that their agency is unconstrained within the parameters set by the policies they implement. Although a considerable body of research exists that looks at how frontline workers' personal characteristics influence frontline work (Blomberg, Kroll, Kallio & Erola, 2013; Morgen, 2001; Scott, 1997), there is consensus that what frontline workers do and don't depends on more than individual characteristics. Of course, this was also one of the main arguments made by Lipsky (2010) who focused specifically on workers' conditions of work and their impact on policy implementation and delivery. In other words, frontline work is structured: workers operate in complex contexts (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998) that constrain as well as enable their actions by shaping their room for discretionary decision making as well as by framing and limiting their options and decisions in using discretion. According to Vinzant and Crothers (1998) these contexts include, apart from policies and laws, the agencies and organizations for which frontline workers work, supervisors and co-workers, professional associations to which workers belong, other agencies that play a role in policy delivery, clients, etcetera. Although they may emphasize different sets of contextual 'factors' or 'influences', many authors come to a similar conclusion regarding the complexity of the environment in which frontline workers do

their work (Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco & Ketch, 2009; Hasenfeld, 2010; May & Winter, 2009). As a matter of fact, the complexity of this environment has increased, among others as a consequence of new forms of governance for the delivery of public policies and services (Borghi & Van Berkel, 2007; Considine, 2001; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Coping with these contextual influences is a crucial part of frontline workers' agency (Møller & Stone, 2013).

Frontline Work in Welfare-to-Work

This volume aims to gain insight into the frontline, street-level delivery of welfare-to-work or activation policies in European countries; we will use 'welfare-to-work' and 'activation' interchangeably throughout this book. There is considerable debate on how these policies should be defined, which partly reflects the debates about varieties of activation (see Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). For example, Bonoli (2013) distinguished between active social policies and policies aimed at (re-)commodification. According to Bonoli, active social policies "prioritize human capital investment and the removal of obstacles to labour market participation" (Bonoli, 2013, p. 19) whereas policies aimed at (re-)commodification include workfare policies. Other authors made a rather similar distinction—namely, between human capital development and work-first or labour-market attachment approaches in activation policies (Lindsay, McQuaid & Dutton, 2007; Lødemel & Trickey, 2001). Although these approaches remain of interest theoretically, developments in activation and welfare-to-work policies make it increasingly difficult to position national policies in either of these ideal types, given that these policies nowadays often contain mixes of characteristics of both types, especially as a consequence of policy reforms that strengthened conditionality of benefit entitlements and increased work as well as activation obligations of benefit recipients. For pragmatic reasons, therefore, we will define welfare-to-work or activation policies here as those programmes and services that are aimed at strengthening the employability, labour-market or social participation of unemployed benefit recipients of working age, usually by combining enforcing/obligatory/disciplining and enabling/supportive measures in varying extents.

Reforms of activation policies have not only had an impact on the mix of enabling and enforcing elements in these policies but also broadened the target groups of these policies. For example, groups of people that used to be exempted from work and activation obligations may nowadays be treated as 'regular' unemployed people, such as older people, single parents or people with health and disability issues (Lindsay & Houston, 2013). Furthermore, stricter criteria used in evaluating entitlements to sickness and disability benefits or (early) retirement schemes may have resulted in situations in which people that used to be entitled to these benefits are now dependent on unemployment benefits or social assistance. This book will focus on welfare-to-work aimed at unemployed people dependent on unemployment benefit or social assistance schemes. Unemployed people as a target group of activation policies are a very heterogeneous

group, not only in terms of age, gender, education or duration of unemployment but also in terms of issues such as health, childcare responsibilities, etcetera.

Studying welfare-to-work policies from a frontline work perspective is interesting for several reasons. First, as these policies are aimed at people with a vulnerable position in the labour market and in society more generally, the issue of whether frontline practices in welfare-to-work manage to improve their position on the labour market and in society or rather increase their vulnerability is an interesting issue in its own sake and is being debated extensively in the academic literature. For although in general activation policies meet wide support in society and among policy makers, the specific instruments and measures introduced as part of these policies are far more contested—and this specifically refers to the enforcing, sanctioning and disciplining elements in these policies. Thus studying frontline work in this policy area contributes to our insights in the practical delivery *and* implications of activation policies. Second, activation policies are a type of policies *par excellence* where the role of frontline workers as mediators of politics becomes tangible. For these policies include objectives and use instruments that are often considered hard to reconcile. For example, they are aimed at preventing benefit fraud and at strengthening individual responsibilities, while they should at the same time promote social inclusion, fight poverty and remove labour-market barriers. In terms of instruments and interventions, activation policies combine supportive and enabling services with punitive elements such as sanctions or benefit withdrawal. The dilemmas and tensions arising from these various objectives, instruments and interventions need to be resolved and—as this book will show—are somehow *being* resolved at the frontlines. Third, activation policies often combine—using Hasenfeld’s (2010) terminology—people-processing with people-changing technologies, as a consequence of the close links between benefit and activation systems in most countries. Thus the provision of activation often includes rule and regulation guided work with forms of service provision that resemble professional rather than bureaucratic work. Furthermore, in contrast to, for example, the health domain, the ‘activation domain’ is not dominated by a high-status profession and a strongly institutionalized professional group that might be able to provide a legitimate counter-narrative to political rhetoric and hypes and might challenge the often highly politicized debates and policymaking in activation policies. Therefore, the study of frontline work in activation policies not only supplements the academic insights in these policies that we gain from formal policy studies and studies of the effectiveness of activation policies but also provides insights of wider relevance for studies of policy implementation and service delivery ‘at the frontlines’.

A Contextualized Approach of Activation Frontline Work

As was mentioned before, frontline workers do not act independently from contextual factors or influences that shape their work, the discretion that they have and their use of discretion. In other words, these contexts shape—mediated through frontline workers’ agency—the actual delivery of activation policies:

activation practices. In trying to understand and interpret frontline practices in welfare-to-work, this book will focus particular attention to four contexts considered relevant.

First of all, the activation *policy* context. It seems rather obvious—if not superfluous—to mention the policy context explicitly as structuring frontline work in activation: for whatever happens at the frontlines of the agencies responsible for implementing activation policies, workers *are* expected to implement the objectives of these policies in some way and to use the instruments and measures regulated in these policies. However, from an internationally comparative perspective it remains interesting to study this aspect of the frontline work context, as it is a vital part of explaining differences in national activation practices. Two aspects of the policy context are of specific importance. On the one hand, of course, policy content which, generally speaking, includes the objectives and instruments of activation policies, the target groups of these policies and the mix of enabling and disciplining elements that characterize activation. On the other hand, we need to pay attention to characteristics of the regulation of activation as such. When we talk about formal policies, we often implicitly refer to *national* formal policies. However, national formal policies often tell only part of the story of what formal activation policies look like: these policies are decentralized and deregulated to different degrees and in different ways in different countries (Lopez-Santana, 2015; Rice, 2015), and this has two implications that are potentially important for the frontline delivery of activation policies. On the one hand, it may imply that formal policies not only exist at the national level but also at regional or local levels, and this means that policy contexts may not only differ between countries but also between regions or municipalities, potentially resulting in diverse activation practices within individual countries. On the other hand, it may imply that activation policies (irrespective of the levels where these policies are made) are regulated in more or less detail: and this may include policy objectives and instruments as well as more operational issues involved in the delivery of policies. Depending on this ‘regulation density’, frontline workers and their organizations responsible for policy delivery may have more or less discretion in decision making.

The second context to which this book will pay specific attention concerns the *governance* context. This refers to the ways in which the delivery and provision of welfare-to-work are organized, the agencies and actors that are involved in policy delivery and the ways in which the relations between these agencies and actors are structured. Activation policies are a policy area where significant governance reforms have been taking place and are still taking place (Conside, 2001; Larsen & Van Berkel, 2009; Van Berkel, De Graaf & Sirovátka, 2011). These reforms have an impact on the roles of frontline workers in agencies responsible for delivering activation, on the actors with whom they need to collaborate and on how they relate to these actors. One important aspect of the governance of activation policies concerns the organization and coordination of the administration of income provision and the delivery of activation: does this involve different agencies (which may cooperate through one-stop

shops) or are these policies implemented by the same agency? This governance aspect has consequences for the combination of enabling and disciplining elements of activation at the street level of implementing agencies. Another important aspect regards the role of service markets and networks in the provision of activation, as activation policies are an area in which all types of service delivery take place: public delivery, marketized delivery involving both public and private providers, and delivery through networks. Finally, new public management instruments in the management of public agencies involved in policy delivery are an important aspect of governance as well (for example, Sol & Westerveld, 2005). As we will see throughout this book, steering these public agencies through management-by-objectives or performance targets systems or through financial incentives has become rather common practice in Europe.

The third context we look at, the *organizational* context, investigates how frontline work is organized and managed *within* the organizations and agencies responsible for the provision of activation (which, of course, will be contingent on policy and governance contexts). Of course, the importance of the organizational context for policy implementation at the street level has been recognized ever since Lipsky's book on street-level bureaucracies was published. Following the analysis in his book, 'conditions of work' will be one of the issues we will pay attention to when analysing the role of the organizational context in structuring frontline practices. Besides, we are interested in what mix of bureaucratic (rule regulated), professional and managerial (for example, performance management) elements characterize the organization and management of frontline activation work at the organizational level.

Finally, the *occupational* context deserves attention. Generally speaking, the occupational context refers to the professional training of frontline workers in activation, the role of professional associations in policy making and policy implementation, and the impact of professionalism on how workers treat their clients and provide activation services. Compared to the other frontline work contexts that this book focuses on, the occupational context of the frontline delivery of activation work has received little attention. One of the reasons for this may be that workers delivering activation have no clear professional profile, at least in most countries, and are recruited from a variety of professions, making them a rather heterogeneous group. As a matter of fact, the professional nature of this type of work itself is contested: as was mentioned before, it often is a mix of rule-guided policy administration and professional service provision. These characteristics of activation workers and activation work make the occupational context all the more interesting. For in as far as the delivery of activation does involve forms of professional service provision and the use of people-changing technologies, the heterogeneity of workers' professional training background might result in diversity of activation practices that partly depend on the specific skills, competences and attitudes workers acquired in their (professional) education.

Summarizing, the core theme of the book are frontline practices in the delivery of activation services and the implementation of activation policies. Frontline practices are structured by the various contexts distinguished earlier. It is

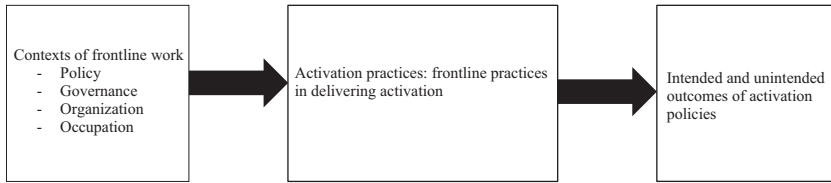


Figure 1.1 A Contextualized Approach of Activation Frontline Work: Analytical Model

through these structured frontline practices that activation policies are ‘made’. And eventually, these practices contribute to the ‘production’ of the outcomes of activation policies, their intended and unintended consequences and, in terms of formal policy objectives, implementation success or failure. This analytical model, which is summarized in Figure 1.1, results in the following research questions that this book addresses:

- How do frontline workers in street-level organizations deliver activation policies and services, in terms of the practical nature and content of activation processes as well as the treatment, involvement and participation of clients in activation processes?
- How are frontline practices in activation structured and shaped by the policy, governance, organizational and occupational contexts in which frontline workers do their work?
- How do workers’ frontline practices affect the intended and unintended outcomes of activation policies?

Aims and Structure of the Book

Ideally, we would like to present in this book the results of a systematic investigation of the various elements of, and relations in, the analytical model in Figure 1.1 in the context of an internationally comparative research project. However, the state of the art in research of frontline practices in activation in Europe does not permit such an ambitious approach. As Chapter 2 elaborates, the frontline delivery of activation has received increasing scholarly attention in European countries over the last decade. Nevertheless, available studies address specific elements of the analytical model only and especially internationally comparative studies are very scarce. What is more, in various countries, researchers experience limitations in getting access to the frontlines of activation, which hampers gaining insight into frontline work, and, more generally, large-scale studies of frontline work require considerable resources, even in national studies. Therefore, the ambitions of this book are more modest and explorative. Our ambition is to provide insights into what frontline activation practices look like in a selection of European countries and to make a tentative assessment of the impact of context influences on frontline work on the one hand, and of the consequences of frontline

work for outcomes of activation policies on the other. Unavoidably, the insights presented in this book are more ‘impressionist’ and incomplete and less robust and systematic than one would desire, especially where the internationally comparative dimension is concerned. At the same time, this is where this research area stands at the moment. We therefore hope that this book, which is the first to present a collection of studies of frontline activation work from eight European countries, will be helpful in mapping what is currently known about this type of frontline work and that it will encourage researchers in Europe to engage in further research in this area, to promote international cooperation and to deepen our comparative knowledge of activation practices.

In selecting countries for inclusion in this book, we tried to realize diversity along various dimensions. First, we included countries that already received some attention in the available international academic literature on frontline work in activation (the UK, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands) as well as countries that are less well-known in this literature (Poland, France, Italy, Austria). From a more substantial point of view, the various welfare regimes in Europe are represented in the book but at the same time, we considered this traditional criterion for selecting countries in international social policy studies insufficient as it mainly deals with the ‘policy context’ of frontline work in activation. In line with our discussion of frontline work contexts earlier, we also looked at other dimensions of diversity:

- the book includes countries where activation policies are characterized by relatively high levels of centralization (France, Austria, Germany) and countries with relatively high levels of policy decentralization or deregulation (Denmark, the Netherlands) or even policy fragmentation (Italy);
- countries were selected where the ‘marketization’ of the provision of activation services used to be (the Netherlands) or is (the UK) widespread as well as countries where marketization is less common (France, Italy) or a relatively recent phenomenon (Poland);
- the book includes countries where various operational issues in activation (such as workers’ tasks, profiling instruments, services, frequency of contacts with clients) are to some degree subject to national regulation (for example, Denmark, Germany) and countries where these issues are at the discretion of public (the Netherlands) or contracted (the UK) agencies responsible for providing activation;
- in terms of the occupational context, the book includes countries where social workers are (or used to be) a relatively important professional group in the provision of activation (Denmark, Poland), countries where the role of social workers is more modest (the Netherlands, Germany, Austria) and countries where social workers hardly are involved in activation work (the UK).

The structure of the book is as follows.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of frontline research in activation work and provides insight into the main characteristics of the available international

academic literature on the frontline delivery of activation. In addition, it explores the main frontline work topics that this literature discusses, the evidence that the literature provides regarding the relevance of the various contexts in shaping frontline practices, as well as the issue of how frontline practices are seen as influencing the intended and unintended consequences of activation policies.

Despite obvious differences between Europe and the US, research into the frontline delivery of activation policies in European countries can find inspiration in US studies. The US has a longer tradition of studies of frontline activation delivery than Europe. Furthermore, similarities in the contexts in which frontline activation practices develop may have increased rather than decreased since the early days of activation policies. In terms of the policy context, the 'workfarist' elements in welfare-to-work policies characteristic for the US variety of activation have become more pronounced in many European welfare states. Something similar can be said about the governance context of implementing activation policies. As was mentioned before, the application of new public management inspired models for the provision of public services and for the management of public agencies that have been a focus of frontline activation work studies in the US for several decades, has characterized reforms in European activation policies in many countries. Against this background, Chapter 3 discusses some main findings of US studies of frontline activation work and reflects on how these findings may inspire European research in this area.

Chapters 4 thru 10 form the empirical core of the book: these chapters analyse and discuss the frontline delivery of activation policies in individual European countries and, in one case (Chapter 7) in two cities in two European countries. In some of the chapters, the emphasis is on the presentation of results of frontline work studies conducted by the author(s); in other chapters, the authors embed results from their own research into a broader discussion of studies conducted in their countries. Each of the chapters discusses specific aspects and characteristics of frontline practices in activation. Chapter 4, on the UK, focuses on evaluation data to present findings on personalization, discretion, 'creaming and parking', sanctions and the accountability of service providers for the quality and impact of their services. Chapter 5, which discusses activation in France, analyses how frontline workers deal with a stricter sanction regime and with increased demands on job seekers' flexibility in the labour market. Chapter 6, which focuses on the German case, looks among others at counselling practices and contacts between clients and caseworkers, at the way in which frontline workers perceive their own roles in service delivery and at the use of one of the core instruments of activation policies, the integration agreement. Chapter 7 compares activation frontline work in an Italian and an Austrian city. The main emphasis is on discretion and the use of discretion by frontline workers in both cities and the degree to which frontline agency is a collective professional or rather an individualized project. Frontline activation work in Poland is discussed in Chapter 8. The Chapter looks at how two types of integration agreements ('activation contracts' and 'individual social

employment plans') are used in two main institutions in Polish activation, addressing issues such as with what clients these contracts are made, the content of the contracts, the role of clients in making the contract, etcetera. In Chapter 9, the focus is on frontline activation work in the Netherlands. The chapter focuses on the issue that despite an increasingly similar treatment in formal activation policies of unemployed people remote and very remote from the labour market, frontline work is characterized by a rather different treatment of both groups. Various context characteristics are explored in analysing how this differential treatment might be explained. Finally, Chapter 10 focuses attention on Denmark. Using empirical data from a case study conducted in two Danish municipalities, the use of sanctions is presented as a case to exemplify how frontline work is interrelated with governance, organization and occupational background.

Chapter 11 reflects on the national studies presented in the book. Some core issues in activation practices arising from the chapters in the book are identified. In addition, attention is paid to the core issue addressed in this book: how can context characteristics of frontline work contribute to our understanding of frontline activation practices? Finally, some general lines are discussed along which future frontline activation research could be developed.

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