

11 Conclusions and Topics for Future Research

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The first chapter of this book outlined the relevance of frontline work studies in the delivery of activation or welfare-to-work policies. There, the main aims of this book were presented: to gain insight into how frontline workers in organizations and agencies responsible for the provision of welfare-to-work actually deliver policies and services and how these ‘activation practices’ are structured by various contexts (policy, governance, organizational and occupational). Context characteristics exert pressures on frontline workers in terms of what they should do, how they should do it and what resources they have at their disposal. This implies that in analysing and understanding frontline agency, these context characteristics—which go beyond the policies that frontline workers are expected to implement—and how they become embedded in frontline workers’ decisions and practices need full attention.

This final chapter reflects on the previous chapters in three steps. The first section looks at the core topic of this book: activation practices. Although, as was explained in Chapter 1, an international comparison of these practices requires a more robust comparative methodological design than this book is able to offer, several common themes and topics in activation practices can be identified on the basis of the previous chapters. These themes and topics help us to elaborate why researchers, policy makers, managers and frontline workers should be concerned about frontline activation work; what practices a contextual approach helps to understand and explain; and what issues require further research. The second section returns to the core argument throughout this book—namely, that these activation practices can only be understood and explained when we take into account the contexts in which they take place. More specifically, we argued that it is not merely the policy context that matters: the governance, organizational and occupational contexts structure frontline practices as well. In other words, frontline workers delivering welfare-to-work not only implement rules and regulations that are laid down in formal policies. Workers and their practices are embedded in the logics of reforms of the public sector and service provision models that make them responsible for realizing specific results and outcomes, often in collaboration with workers in other organizations and agencies to whom they are related in specific ways. In addition, they are (1) members of organizations and as such they are expected to contribute to their organization’s strategic

goals, and (2) and they are members of occupational or professional groups (or, at least, they are trained in specific occupations or professions) from which they derive values and standards for doing a ‘good job’ and delivering quality. In this complex context, frontline workers are expected to deliver activation to a heterogeneous group of clients with various needs and problems. The second section elaborates on this by looking at context characteristics in the countries discussed in this book and by analysing some specific activation practices in more detail to show that besides welfare-to-work policies, the other contexts distinguished in this book play their own role in shaping activation in practice. The third and final section suggests some general lines along which future research into the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work could be developed, following up on main topics discussed in this chapter.

Activation Practices

Looking at what this book tells us about activation practices, much attention in frontline activation research is focused on the more disciplining aspects of welfare-to-work, whereas studies of the support and counselling that workers provide to their clients are less pronounced and more patchy (see the Chapters on the German, Dutch and Polish cases). Of course, there are many good reasons to address sanctioning practices. The use of sanctions in activation is contested, sanctions may have major consequences for clients and effects of sanctions are controversial (see Chapter 6). In addition, sanctioning practices are an exemplary case to show how activation practices are shaped by context characteristics: which not only include policy rules and regulations but also, among others, the ways in which sanction processes are organized, new public management tools, workers’ caseloads, workers’ occupational and professional identities, etcetera—we will return to this in the next section. Nevertheless, frontline activation workers do more than sanctioning and disciplining their clients. They also provide support and counselling, that they need to balance and mediate with activation’s disciplining elements.

A core issue in activation practices arising throughout this book is the issue of categorizing clients. Categorization takes place in all aspects of the delivery of welfare-to-work. It is part of the assessment and profiling process at the start of activation processes and it is a routine element of the decisions frontline workers make during activation processes: decisions concerning creaming and parking of clients (see, for example, the UK, Austrian and Dutch cases); decisions concerning whether or not to offer activation contracts to clients, the content of these contracts and the participation of clients in drawing up these contracts (see the Polish case); decisions concerning sanctioning and, more generally, adopting a more ‘lenient’ or ‘tough’ approach towards clients (see the French and Austrian cases); decisions concerning the frequency of meetings with clients (see the German case); etcetera. The criteria that are used in categorization processes are manifold. They include complex criteria such as labour-market distance; clients’ neediness; clients’ cooperative attitude, motivation and willingness; clients’

employability, work ability and job readiness; and even clients' 'moral worth'. They also include criteria that may be used as 'proxies' of the previously mentioned criteria, such as age, gender, duration of unemployment, skills, parenthood or ethnic background. For clients, these categorization processes may have a significant impact on the kind of support and treatment they will be entitled to, the kind of efforts expected from them, the intensity and nature of the support they will receive, etcetera. The previous chapters showed that categorization processes are an unavoidable part of frontline work as it helps workers to mediate between the contexts in which they operate on the one hand, and the real worlds of clients—that confront them with a large variety of individual needs, problems and circumstances to which they have to be responsive in order to be successful—on the other. More specifically, categorization processes are contextualized practices. That is, categorization practices and the criteria that are used in these practices reflect characteristics of the policy, governance, organizational and occupational contexts in which workers work. This does not make the issue of the degree to which categorization processes are transparent and open to scrutiny and debate less relevant. Instead, it means that this issue should be framed not as an issue of *individual* worker agency but as an issue of *structured* worker agency.

Categorization processes and how they take place are one of the examples of the role of discretion and its use in frontline activation. What goes for categorization specifically goes for discretionary decision-making practices more generally: they are structured practices, they take place permanently and in all aspects of service delivery and they are an inherent element of providing social services to a heterogeneous target group. As will be elaborated in the next section, the previous chapters provide ample evidence that the use of discretion remains a major issue, not only in the sense that it is a core research topic but also in the sense that uses of discretion and how these are structured and affect clients raise concerns. The position of clients in activation processes make these concerns even more pressing: as was highlighted in various chapters (see, among others, the German and Polish cases), client participation in frontline decision making is very weakly developed, and opportunities for redress are complex (see the UK case). And obviously, opt-out possibilities for clients are extremely limited (and this may also be the case, as the UK example shows, in the context of marketized service provision). At the same time, and in line with previous comments about categorization, concerns regarding the use of discretion should be analysed in terms of how workers' agency is structured by characteristics of the contexts in which they operate. Promoting transparency of and debate about the use of discretion refers to frontline workers' decision making as well as to the decision making of actors involved in shaping frontline work's context characteristics.

One of the areas where the use of discretion is specifically salient regards situations where frontline workers experience dilemmas in their work. These dilemmas relate to what workers perceive or experience as potentially conflicting aspects of their work, of which the dilemma between the enabling and disciplining/sanctioning aspect is most obvious—and mentioned in most of the previous chapters. Another dilemma (see, for example, the German

chapter) concerns workers' focus on realizing short-term or long-term outcomes with clients which refers, for example, to the tension between quick versus sustainable labour-market reintegration. In addition, workers may experience dilemmas in deciding whether to focus their work on strictly implementing rules or regulations, on realizing their performance targets or on solving problems and realizing results with their clients. The themes of how workers perceive their roles, of occupational or professional identities, and of workers' styles (see Chapters 4, 6 and 7) are therefore not merely reflecting individual preferences but also tell us something about the complex contexts in which they work and the multiple pressures they have to deal with in their work. Finally, workers may feel confronted with ethical or moral dilemmas in their work. The Dutch case provides one example: should workers working with limited resources focus on all their clients or on a proportion of clients in order to provide them with more adequate services? Ethical and moral dilemmas evidently also arise in the context of sanctioning, especially when frontline workers are aware of the possible consequences of sanctions for their clients (or for workers' relationships with clients), or when workers understand and respect the reasons why clients failed to meet obligations (see, for example, Chapters 5 and 6). A final example is the dilemma between equal and personalized treatment of clients—which brings us to the final topic of this section.

Personalization of activation services is widely acclaimed nowadays as an important approach in making activation services more successful (and as an important driver for discretionary powers of frontline workers). Individual activation plans are considered to be a vital instrument in pursuing personalization. However, the findings presented in the previous chapters give little reason to be very optimistic about the contribution of these activation plans to personalization. The French case, for example, showed that the monthly reviews that were introduced as a way to promote personalization, eventually seem to have developed mainly into an instrument of monitoring, disciplining and sanctioning. German experiences with activation plans are not very encouraging either. In many cases, these plans do not meet legal requirements: they are often standardized rather than personalized; in many cases, the principle of 'mutual rights and obligations' is not fulfilled, with clients' obligations being included in the plans in much more detail than service providers' obligations, and client participation in developing the plans is often absent. Polish experiences with activation plans in the social welfare agencies (OPS) reveal that their use is characterized by an administrative approach. At the same time, experiences with activation plans in the context of social integration centres (CIS) provide more positive examples of the potential contribution of these plans to personalized service provision processes.

Frontline Work in Contexts

Against the background of the contextual approach of frontline work adopted in this book, all chapters paid considerable attention to analysing the context in which the frontline delivery of activation takes place. One of the most striking points highlighted in these analyses concerns the amount and frequency of

developments and reforms that all countries—including the relatively ‘late reformers’—have witnessed since the first activation reforms took place, and these developments and reforms include all four contexts that this book focused on. Although this was not explicitly included in the analytical model presented in Chapter 1 and not explicitly addressed in the previous chapters, it could be hypothesized that the highly dynamic environment in which frontline workers work has its own impact on workers and their practices. This is not the place to speculate about the nature of this impact, but it might be an issue to keep in mind in studies of frontline work.

Looking at the various contexts in more detail, we see considerable similarities as well as significant diversity across countries. Some common trends are taking place in all or most countries, but they often do so in different ways (and, of course, in different national traditions).

First, welfare-to-work policy reforms in most countries reveal (i) a broadening of target groups of these policies, (ii) a stronger focus on labour-market (re-)integration, (iii) stricter sanctioning and conditionality regulations and (iv) a broadening of the types of jobs jobseekers are expected to accept. The clearest exception among the countries discussed in this book is Italy where activation and income protection are least integrated. How these general policy reforms structure the enabling and disciplining activities—and the balance between the two—of frontline workers requires a more detailed analysis of these reforms. For example, policy reforms aimed at broadening welfare-to-work target groups implies in several countries that workers are confronted with new groups of clients who are often confronted with far more serious problems (in terms of health, social circumstances, debts, employability, etcetera) than the groups activation was traditionally aimed at. At the same time, activation policies have been made more obligatory and stricter employment-focused. How these general trends play out in national contexts, may be different. In Germany, frontline workers are now expected to reintegrate unemployed persons with a work ability of at least three hours into the labour market. In the Netherlands, a somewhat different situation exists: broadening target groups was not only accompanied by a stricter focus on employment but also by a broadening of participation obligations of the unemployed, that now may include ‘obligatory voluntary work’, especially for people considered hard to reintegrate into the labour market. Polish frontline workers are confronted with hard-to-employ clients as well, but the two types of activation contracts the Polish social welfare agencies can use still give frontline workers the option to focus support either on labour-market integration or on overcoming problematic circumstances. Another example to illustrate similarities and differences concerns policy reforms that redefine what jobseekers should consider ‘suitable’ or ‘acceptable jobs’. In the French case, jobseekers are expected to be flexible regarding wage levels and willingness to travel, but not regarding skills and qualifications. German jobseekers enjoy less protection of previous occupational status than in the past, and Dutch long-term unemployed jobseekers are expected to accept any available job. As a final example, sanctioning regulations can be mentioned. Despite stricter sanctioning regulations in many

countries, the previous chapters also pointed at various other regulations related to sanctioning that frontline workers are expected to observe. Polish frontline workers, for example, are not allowed to use withholding financial assistance as a way of sanctioning benefit recipients in case this would deteriorate the position of persons dependent on these recipients. In Denmark, regulations stipulate that the sanctioning process should include an assessment of whether sanctions are likely to promote recipients' work availability or attendance of activation activities, suggesting that sanctions should only be used when they are 'effective'. All these regulations are important in that they define the parameters within which frontline workers' agency is shaped. What adds to the complexity of contextual analyses and comparisons between countries is that whereas the examples mentioned earlier are derived from *national* regulations, regional and local regulations should be taken into account as well. This goes both for 'traditionally' decentralized countries such as Italy, but also for 'recently' decentralized countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark (see the following).

Second, governance reforms have been taking place in all countries as well. In most countries, the landscape of organizations traditionally responsible for implementing employment and social policies has changed dramatically: by the establishment or involvement of new (public *and* private) organizations, by mergers of traditional organizations or by increased forms of cooperation between organizations. Many countries also experienced new public management style reforms. The marketization of service provision has gained ground in several countries although nowhere as drastically as in the case of the UK's Work Programme—in fact, some 'early marketizing' countries (for example, the Netherlands) witnessed a process of partial de-marketization. The new public management of public organizations (and the workers in these organizations) has received considerable attention throughout this book. We saw examples of performance management of organizations and workers in most countries, although in different ways and to different degrees, Denmark being an example of a country where a relatively extensive package of new public management style reforms has been introduced. New public management also contributed to the introduction of new forms of standardization. Traditional forms of standardization through rules and regulations are still present (for example, policies regulating available activation instruments in Germany; the 'objectification' of circumstances under which sanctions can be imposed on clients in France; stricter sanction regulations in the Netherlands) but are now combined with new forms of standardization through the setting of performance targets and indicators and through processes of monitoring and benchmarking (for example, sanctioning levels in Denmark; performance targets regarding benefit exits and labour-market entries in several countries). In as far as new public management also refers to new relations between service providers and their 'customers', activation 'contracts' and activation 'plans' have become part and parcel of the process of activating the unemployed; although, as we saw in the previous section, there are hardly indications that this has indeed empowered clients.

A recurrent issue in debates on the governance of welfare-to-work concerns processes of centralization and decentralization. Countries discussed in this book have very different traditions in this respect: included are countries with traditional high levels of centralization (the UK) and with traditional high levels of decentralization (Italy)—although recently, as we saw in the respective chapters, the UK has witnessed processes of decentralization in the context of the Work Programme whereas Italy has witnessed processes aimed at centralization. New public management complicates debates about centralization and decentralization, as it often combines processes of decentralization with ‘new modes’ of centralization. Thus the UK Work Programme is presented as a decentralization of service provision (the ‘black box’ approach), but is accompanied by forms of centralization through the contracts between the responsible government department and the private providers. Denmark and the Netherlands experienced processes of ‘municipalization’ of the provision of activation, but these took place in the context of the introduction of new public management tools such as new funding mechanisms, performance management and benchmarking systems. How these processes of ‘centralized decentralization’ (Larsen, 2013) affect frontline agencies’ and frontline workers’ room for and use of discretion, is an intriguing but also complex issue.

Third, partly related to policy and governance reforms, the organizational context in which frontline workers deliver services has changed. Some workers had to start working for completely new organizations, some were confronted with mergers and reorganizations, or with more or less institutionalized new forms of cooperation with other organizations. Maybe more profoundly, the combined result of developments taking place in the policy, governance and organizational contexts is that frontline workers’ tasks as well as frontline workers’ clients or customers are subject to change. At the most basic level, the introduction of welfare-to-work and stricter conditionality have had a considerable impact on frontline workers’ tasks that used to be focused on providing social support (the social workers in Poland and Denmark, for example), on benefit administration (many workers in Dutch local welfare agencies as well as the administrative staff that used to be responsible for German social assistance) or combinations of these tasks. Whether the new welfare-to-work related tasks result in task enrichment or in task replacement strongly depends on national conditions. Comparing social workers in Poland and Denmark, for example, Polish social workers in social welfare agencies are still in the position to continue much of their ‘traditional’ social work tasks, whereas Danish social workers experienced a strong erosion of ‘traditional’ social work tasks, many of them now being mainly responsible for labour-market integration. Task specialization is another development that reveals differences when comparing countries. For example, the tasks of activation and benefit administration may be integrated (Poland) or separated (Germany, the UK); or this issue may be dependent on local decision making (the Netherlands). Something similar goes for activation and sanctioning, which is integrated in countries such as Germany, Poland, France and Austria; largely separated in the UK and Denmark; and currently a

‘non-issue’—given the lack of integration of income provision and activation—for frontline workers in Italy. Specialization may also refer to workers’ client groups, labour-market distance and age (special facilities and workers for the young unemployed) being the most frequently used dimensions of client-group specialization. In addition, as the earlier examples show, whereas in some countries (aspects of) tasks and task specialization are subject to national regulation, in others they are organizational or local decisions. In France, for example, frontline workers’ tasks towards jobseekers and employers are outlined in detail in so-called national competency frameworks. National regulations in Denmark stipulate that (frontline workers in) jobcentres should focus on employment integration only. German national regulations distinguish between case managers for individuals very remote from the labour market and integration officers for jobseekers closer to the labour market. In contrast, these kind of task specialization decisions are a responsibility of local welfare agencies in the Netherlands.

Apart from changes in tasks, changes in workers’ clients or customers have been taking place as well. We already pointed out that activation’s target groups have been broadened, including now people with considerable barriers to labour-market participation. In addition, several chapters pointed out that employers have become an increasingly important ‘customer group’ of welfare-to-work (for example, France, Germany, the Netherlands) with obvious implications for frontline workers and their tasks, although this aspect of frontline work has hardly been studied until now.

Of course, other characteristics of the organizational context matter as well. Organizational personnel recruitment strategies, for example, may be more or less subject to national regulations. The Polish Social Welfare Act regulates that workers in welfare agencies should have social work qualifications, and in France, detailed competency frameworks describe what is expected from frontline workers. However, irrespective of whether recruitment processes are subject to national regulations or not, they may become part of reform strategies. For example, changes in the French competency frameworks reveal that a more managerialist and business-oriented frontline worker has become more desirable. In Denmark and the Netherlands, local differences were observed in the degree to which social workers are recruited as frontline workers. As a final example of organizational context characteristics that matter for frontline work, several chapters pointed at the relevance of both the ‘old’ public management problem of workers’ caseloads and the ‘new’ public management issue of workers’ performance management.

In the aforementioned discussion, several issues were addressed that refer to the occupational context of frontline work. In general, the previous chapters confirm what was mentioned in Chapter 2—namely, that frontline workers responsible for the delivery of activation are a very heterogeneous group in terms of their educational backgrounds. Poland is the only country where one professional group (in this case, social workers) dominates frontline activation work, at least in the social welfare agencies (OPS). Denmark is an opposite example in the sense that there, social work and its dominance in frontline

activation has been an explicit target of policy reforms and policy debates, as social workers were accused of frustrating the implementation of welfare-to-work reforms. Opening up Danish frontline activation work for workers with other professional backgrounds has been an explicit strategy to undermine the dominant role of social workers. Other countries show developments where new types of workers enter activation work as well (Germany, France, the Netherlands), but not as part of an active governmental strategy to reduce the role of an ‘established’ profession. Although in most countries there is no single professional group (social workers or otherwise) with a dominant position in frontline activation work, ‘professionalism’ in the provision of activation services is an issue in various countries (for example, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands). But in these countries the debate about professionalism is not about the question of what ‘established’ profession should be made responsible for activation, but rather about the kind of competences and skills frontline activation workers need in order to professionalize the delivery of activation.

Against the background of this brief overview of similarities and differences in reforms and developments in the contexts of the frontline delivery of activation, we will now present a more detailed analysis of some characteristics of activation practices. The main aim of this analysis is to illustrate the importance of contexts in understanding frontline practices and, more specifically, to substantiate the added value of paying attention to the governance, organizational and occupational contexts in frontline work studies.

The Use of Discretion

For obvious reasons, which were discussed in Chapter 2 as well as in the previous section, discretion is one of the core issues in frontline work research. The country chapters paid considerable attention to how frontline workers exercise discretion in delivering activation, illustrating vividly that workers do indeed use discretion in activating their clients. Our aim here is to illustrate—in line with comments about discretion made earlier in this chapter—that the use of discretion and the critical issues it gives rise to do not only result from frontline workers’ decisions and actions but also from decisions made by policy makers, managers and other stakeholders that shape the contexts in which frontline workers act and actually use discretion.

When we analyse what the previous chapters reveal about discretion and the use of discretion as ‘structured decision-making practices’, the following points can be highlighted. First, contextual pressures that frontline workers experience are multiple but not necessarily consistent so that they do not always structure frontline work and the use of discretion in similar and coherent ways. The chapters provided us with plenty examples of this. In many countries policies require frontline workers to provide tailor-made and personalized services, which in itself implies that workers need discretion in order to realize policy objectives in individual cases and to match policies with ‘the real worlds’ of clients. However, other contextual pressures make personalized service

provision hard to achieve. Regulations concerning frequency of client meetings that were found in Denmark and Germany ('contact density concepts') could make it hard for frontline workers to distribute time and attention according to clients' needs. Organizational resource distribution systems, concerning workers' caseloads for example, or new public management tools that aim to focus organizations or individual workers on (quick) labour-market reintegration and benefit independence may create considerable barriers for offering personalized services as well. This is especially the case for target groups more remote from the labour market (see the Dutch case). Workers in the private providers in the UK may be able to personalize their interactions with clients but lack resources to provide personalized external services to them. Workers' occupational background—and organizational personnel recruitment decisions, for that matter—may not provide them with the skills and competences necessary to provide personalized services for client groups with serious labour-market barriers (see the German case). Of course, multiple pressures that are inconsistent (or *perceived* by workers as inconsistent) may already be part of the welfare-to-work policies frontline workers deliver. However, the dilemmas these pressures create for them are strengthened by pressures they experience from the governance, organizational or occupational contexts. Throughout this book, we saw that frontline workers wrestle with reconciling the enabling and disciplinary characteristics of welfare-to-work policies, and that this has become an ever greater challenge for them as a consequence of policy reforms. However, pressures to emphasize the enabling or disciplinary aspects of welfare-to-work also come from other sources. Austrian frontline workers experienced tensions between the branding strategy of their organization that emphasizes its role as 'service provider' (which creates expectations among clients), and the role workers have in sanctioning clients. Something similar was reported in the UK, where frontline workers in some private providers experience tensions between their role as service providers which requires good relationships between workers and clients, and sanctioning clients. French and Danish frontline workers experience tensions between their occupational or professional identities (that refer to the occupational context) and policy as well as organizational pressures to adopt a 'tough' approach to clients. Dilemmas are also experienced in the use of individual activation plans which combine a regulatory function (making explicit rights and obligations of clients, specifically) and the function of creating commitment, engagement and motivation of clients in activation processes. When numbers of individual activation plans become a performance target or when organizational resources are insufficient, there is a considerable risk that the administrative and regulatory functions of these plans come to dominate, as the Polish and German cases show: either because workers feel pressured to meet the numbers or because they lack the means to provide support. Thus decisions that shape the governance, organizational or occupational contexts in which workers operate have an impact on frontline workers' use of discretion. And this may result in activation practices that conflict with policy goals or, in a milder variety, that emphasize some policy goals rather than—or at the

expense of—others. And when stakeholders (or scientists) consider this problematic, tackling this problem requires addressing not only frontline workers' decisions but also decisions and decision makers that influence context characteristics.

This brings us to the second point. The multiple and potentially inconsistent pressures that frontline workers experience show that the academic distinction between 'discretion as granted' and 'discretion as used' may be elegant but is too simplistic. The famous 'hole in the doughnut' that is often used as a metaphor of discretion (Dworkin, 2013, p. 48) may look quite differently when viewed, for example, through a policy lens or through an organizational lens. This means that it cannot be taken for granted that frontline workers dispose of a clearly and unambiguously defined space of discretion. In Dworkin's terminology, they do not operate in a clearly defined 'surrounding belt of restriction'. Instead, interpreting and making sense of the discretion that is granted to them is itself a necessary part of frontline workers' discretionary decision making. Several of the previous chapters point at work experiences, professional/educational socialization or experiences with unemployment as factors that may be related to workers' attitudes and how they perceive their own roles. Against this background it could be hypothesized, for example, that social workers are more responsive to pressures emphasizing the enabling elements of frontline work (and more critical towards pressures they experience as undermining those elements), whereas workers with a more administrative or clerical background are more responsive to pressures exercised through rules and regulations.

The third point that the previous chapters make clear is that diversity in frontline activation practices and the use of discretion is considerable, even in individual countries. In the French case, for example, we saw differences in workers' leniency in imposing sanctions and in the use of mandating or negotiating strategies in encouraging jobseekers' flexibility. The German chapter pointed at different 'roles' that workers may identify with, which has an impact on what their activation practices look like. Something similar was found in the Austrian case, where some workers emphasized the enabling and caring aspects of their work whereas others adopt a more rule-oriented attitude to their work. Somewhat atypical, the Italian case shows frontline workers who endorse the non-compulsory services they are able to provide, but also workers who expressed that they lack opportunities for a more demanding way of providing services to their clients. The Polish chapter pointed at differences in the use of discretion in working with activation contracts, for example, where promoting clients' involvement in drawing up these contracts are concerned. One may very well consider this diversity among frontline workers problematic, especially when it has little relation with the aim of service personalization; the risk of 'arbitrariness' in frontline work decisions is real, even though this does not mean that workers' individual decisions are arbitrary. However, in line with what was argued earlier, this diversity is not merely (and probably not even mainly) a manifestation of frontline workers' individual preferences or attitudes

towards elements of welfare-to-work. It is also related to the diversity of pressures that they experience from policy makers, managers, colleagues, professional associations, etcetera; pressures that they need to relate and respond to in one way or the other.

This brings us to the final point that relates to how frontline workers account for the way in which discretion is used. In as far as the previous chapters provide insights into this issue, two general lines of giving account can be distinguished. On the one hand, frontline workers refer to their clients in justifying what they do. Most examples in this book refer to sanctioning, where client characteristics or circumstances are referred to both as a reason to adopt a lenient approach towards sanctions or, in contrast, to be strict on sanctioning. On the other hand, workers point at contextual pressures in explaining their decisions and agency. They point at (specific) policy aims, at organizational and work conditions, or at professional standards to account for the things they do or don't do. The chapters provide ground for some tentative conclusions that need further elaboration but are worth mentioning here. First of all, although we have little systematic knowledge about the degree to which policy makers, managers and other stakeholders consider accounting for workers' use of discretion in terms of clients' needs as justified, we do know that it is contested. We also saw that frontline workers refer to clients' needs and circumstances not only to account for diversity in using discretion but also to account for instances where they deviate from what they believe they are expected to do, where they engage in bending rules and regulations, etcetera. This points at frictions experienced by frontline workers between contextual demands and 'the real worlds' of clients. Second, the chapters provide indications that diversity in using discretion can indeed be accounted for by referring to contextual pressures. Multiple and not always consistent pressures up to certain degrees enable workers to legitimate strict or lenient approaches in sanctions, to justify a directive or more open approach in developing activation plans, to account for the inclusion or exclusion of the most vulnerable groups from services, etcetera. Third, making decisions and being accountable for one's decisions may be a very individual project for frontline workers. In this context, 'individual' not only means that every individual frontline worker is confronted with the need to make decisions and be accountable for them but also that making decisions and accounting for them is dealt with individually. At this point, we can only guess at the reasons for this: the heterogeneity of frontline workers and the lack of a joint professional background and knowledge base, the increasing competition between frontline workers in several countries, individual performance appraisal systems in workers' organizations and workers' attachment to individual autonomy are possible reasons that come to mind. Attempts at (re-)professionalizing frontline activation work that were mentioned in several chapters might contribute to more collective approaches to the dilemmas and challenges workers are confronted with.

The Client Group Targeted in Activation

Frontline work is all about realizing policy aims and delivering policies in relation to clients. In implementing welfare-to-work policies in practice, this typically includes a mix of informing, persuading, convincing, disciplining and enabling clients. These types of efforts and how they work out in practice are highly dependent on the relation between the frontline worker and the client. The target group of welfare-to-work policies therefore plays an important role for frontline practices. As was pointed out before, several countries witnessed a tendency towards a broadening of the client group. This is for example the case in the Netherlands, where the subjects of activation now include the unemployed who are categorized as being very remote from the labour market and in Denmark and Germany. In the case of the UK, activation policy is directed at clients who are categorized as 'job ready', but people with long-term health or disabling conditions are also assessed in terms of their ability to carry out some kind of work-related activity designed to move them closer to the labour market. The broad and heterogeneous group of clients at which activation policy is targeted has implications for frontline work. Frontline workers in countries that witnessed a broadening of target groups have to include clients with substantial problems besides unemployment, while other countries are more lenient towards targeting the 'very remote' or 'hard to place' in their activation policies.

The previous chapters provide various insights into the challenges that frontline workers experience in servicing more vulnerable and hard-to-employ groups of clients, and into context characteristics that exacerbate these challenges. Providing activation services to vulnerable groups of clients in the context of stricter sanctioning regimes is one of the challenges workers are confronted with. As was mentioned in the UK and German chapters, frontline workers consider it specifically problematic when sanctions need to be imposed on clients who lack understanding of the rules or are unable to comply with them, such as clients with mental health problems, disorganized lives or people with learning difficulties. The chapters also provide examples of situations in which the enabling aspects of welfare-to-work are under pressure, which may specifically hamper workers' abilities to provide adequate services to the most vulnerable groups of clients.

Other dilemmas occur as well when activation policies are no longer solely targeted towards a homogenous group of clients whose core problem is unemployment. The stronger focus on an employment-centred approach in welfare-to-work has implications for how clients most remote from the labour market can be and are being serviced. What adds to workers' dilemmas in this context is that a stronger emphasis on employment is not only a characteristic of welfare-to-work *policies* (at least, in several countries discussed in this book). Pressures on workers to focus on employment and labour-market integration may also result from other context characteristics. For example, the numbers of clients that accept a job may be the core 'performance' that matters for contracted providers (as is the case in the UK); these numbers may be the most important target of incentives in funding regimes (for example, the Dutch case); or they may be

the core focus of workers' performance targets and monitoring (for example, the French and Austrian cases). The ensuing frontline practices of creaming and parking are clear examples of what was emphasized in the aforementioned discussion—namely, these practices are structured practices. As the UK case illustrated, parking clients who are vulnerable and very remote from the labour market may be seen as a personalized practice from the point of view of an *employment-oriented* approach of welfare-to-work, but may be far from personalized from the point of view of a *needs-oriented* approach.

Besides frontline work dilemmas in dealing with vulnerable clients arising from a stricter focus on sanctioning and employment, other context characteristics are important to take into consideration as well when interpreting and understanding the ways in which frontline workers provide services to the most difficult to employ groups of clients. For example, the German case pointed out that workers' expertise and communication skills may not be sufficient to adequately deal with the situations and needs of vulnerable groups of clients. Furthermore, workers may lack other types of resources (time (as a consequence of caseloads, workloads, administrative tasks, job descriptions) and services) to deal with these clients' needs (see, among others, the Danish, German and Dutch cases). Processes of standardization may hamper adequate service provision processes as well: besides standardized objectives of service provision (see the earlier discussion) this may, for example, include standardized frequencies of meetings with clients.

One overall finding is that the more distanced clients are from the labour market (and the more important other types of barriers besides unemployment), the more difficult it seems to be to make the dominant welfare-to-work philosophy fit with norms and values of frontline workers and needs of clients. In general, it becomes more difficult for frontline workers to take up the role of 'policy mediators' between policy goals and real world problems of citizens. Frontline workers will have to override citizens' needs and prioritize problems and solutions which may conflict with their professional standards and norms and with needs and wishes of clients. Hence, the types of client groups being targeted in welfare-to-work policies are an important indicator of potential resistance from frontline workers. It seems, however, that this type of resistance can be moderated over time: frontline work can be framed through the governance, organizational and occupational contexts in ways that affect frontline workers' attitudes and values—and consequently, the ways in which they deal with new target groups.

Sanctioning Practices

As already touched upon earlier, sanctioning is one of the most important elements of what welfare-to-work policies look like. The extent and type of sanctioning is of course dependent on formal policies and their political intentions, goals and legislation: some of the countries in this book have a stricter orientation towards sanctioning than others. The same goes for the obligations that

follow from welfare-to-work policy, whether it regards the need to apply for jobs, to meet with frontline workers at certain times or to participate in active measures of different kinds, and that may provide opportunities to sanction when these obligations are not met. However, the autonomy and discretion of the frontline worker and how these are structured by characteristics of the other contexts rather than the policy context are important components as well to fully grasp to what extent sanctioning actually takes place on the ground. The incentive/accountability logic built into the governance context, the organizational set-up and the occupational background therefore become important aspects to understand frontline sanctioning practices.

When we look at the national chapters, there are examples of both strict and lenient sanctioning practices. These practices do not only differ from one national context to another but also over time and within countries. We (and others) have found differences in the way sanctions are used as a tool by frontline workers. In several of the national cases, frontline workers have a somewhat ‘Janus-faced role’, as they are responsible for counselling and placements on the one hand and monitoring and sanctions on the other. The dilemmas that can result from these potentially conflicting responsibilities are handled differently in different national contexts: by frontline workers, but also by policy makers and managers. For example, combining these roles may have an impact on workers’ sanctioning practices (for example, as we saw, in order to maintain good relationships with clients), which is sometimes a reason for separating sanctioning from enabling responsibilities (the Danish case) or for automating sanctioning processes (the French case).

Differences are also found within countries—for example, between types of organizations or frontline workers—and between treatments of various types of client groups. The Dutch case provided one example. Although sanctioning in the Netherlands is common practice, substantial differences are found between the use of sanctions towards clients categorized as remote and very remote from the labour market, respectively: a significantly larger proportion of clients remote from the labour market are sanctioned. The Dutch chapter suggests that this may, among others, be related to the fact that frontline workers have more frequent interactions with clients remote from the labour market. In Denmark as well, clients categorized as ready for the labour market receive a larger proportion of the sanctions. In both the Dutch and the Danish cases, significant variation in sanctioning levels also exists between municipalities, pointing at the role of other context characteristics than national sanction regulations as well. What these examples make clear is that in order to understand sanctioning as part of welfare-to-work policy we need to look beyond policy on paper and take a much closer look at how policy in practice is done.

Evidence of the role of the occupational context in sanctioning practices comes from the French case. In France, advisers make little use of direct sanctions compared with the indirect ‘softer’ sanctions linked to the discretionary management of no-shows. In the chapter on France, it is argued that the reluctance to sanctioning is linked to workers’ professional identity. The study showed

that advisers used ‘direct’ sanctioning (removal from the register) as a last resort. Instead, they use their discretion to limit sanctions through the management of no-shows. In practice, this is done by the leeway of frontline workers to administer legitimate reasons for absence of the client. This hesitance or resistance towards the use of sanctions has also been addressed in the Danish case where frontline workers’ educational backgrounds in social work was singled out by politicians to be the main reason for the limited use of sanctions.

Compared to the Danish case, the Polish case is interesting in terms of the role of the occupational background. In Poland, it is possible to sanction clients by deducing or removing their benefit. However, it is prohibited by law to use a sanction if this would cause the situation of those who are dependent on the client to deteriorate. The Polish case is not only interesting compared to other cases as the application of sanctions, although possible within the law, in practice rarely occurs, but also because this is hardly the result of reluctance from frontline workers (who are qualified social workers), as data shows that workers support sanctioning practices. The lack of sanctions results from the legislation that clearly states that the right to receive social welfare assistance prevails even if the client fails to cooperate. Therefore, frontline workers experience attempts to use the possibility of sanctioning as fruitless.

Different sanctioning practices and the variety in harshness and scope of these practices show that frontline workers hold an important position for how political intentions are implemented and how citizens are treated. As the chapters illustrated, this is clearly affected by the governance, organizational and occupational contexts. Although frontline practices are part of historical paths regarding welfare-state traditions, institutions and culture, several chapters show how changes in contexts can change frontline practices and the way sanctions are used. The most prominent example hereof is Denmark, where performance management (governance context) ranks the municipalities according to their level of sanctioning, which makes municipalities change the organization of sanctioning processes (organizational context): the decision of applying sanctions is moved away from professional social workers towards staff with a clerical occupational background in new ‘back offices’ (occupational background). This increased the level of sanctioning considerably. Summarizing, the way in which sanctions are applied is one of the important components to assess the nature of welfare-to-work policies, and this in turn is highly dependent on frontline practices and how these are framed in relation to governance, organizational and occupational contexts.

The Frontline Delivery of Welfare-to-Work: Research Topics

Since the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work is a relatively young research area, especially in Europe, it is not hard to develop an extensive wish list of topics and issues that require further and more systematic research. In an attempt to resist that temptation, this section will elaborate some more general lines along which future frontline research might be developed.

First of all, frontline activation research is an area in which internationally comparative research is very scarce. Fortunately, researchers in Europe and beyond who are interested in this research area increasingly manage to find each other, to become acquainted with each other's work and to discuss and compare research findings—this book is just one example of this. However, this has not yet resulted in a boost in internationally comparative research that, for example, social policy research experienced since the late 1990s. Of course, there are obvious reasons for this: international field research is hard to organize and requires significant resources, countries significantly differ regarding the accessibility of frontline workers and their organizations for research (the UK case may represent an extreme example but is certainly not unique) and methodologically, combining systematic and robust comparative research designs with high context sensitivity presents researchers with quite a challenge. Nevertheless, we hope that the increasing networking activities of researchers and the growing availability of national research into frontline activation work may contribute to creating a solid basis for starting internationally comparative research projects.

At the same time, other types of comparative research are fruitful as well and may be easier to accomplish. Throughout this book we have seen examples of countries where the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work takes place in contexts of increased decentralization (even though this is often accompanied by new forms of centralization) or persistent decentralization, which makes comparisons between local or regional activation practices and the (variety of) contexts in which these take place very interesting. We have also seen examples of countries in which the delivery of welfare-to-work is taking place through various 'models' (the joint-venture and municipal models in Germany) or in various organizational and institutional contexts (the Polish social welfare agencies and social integration centres) that provide fruitful starting points for context-sensitive comparative research. In other words, national contexts provide considerable and, in some cases, increasing opportunities for doing comparative research—probably more than research has seized up until now.

Longitudinal research is another type of comparative research that is hardly taking place in frontline activation research until now. Two types of longitudinal research could be of specific interest. First, longitudinal research could focus on how clients' situations (in terms of well-being, inclusion and exclusion, employability, etcetera) develop during and following activation processes. Second, the rapid succession of reforms in all four contexts that were discussed in this book provides ample opportunities to study the impact of these reforms on frontline practices longitudinally.

Another line for future research regards the scope of activation practices on which researchers focus their studies. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, we still know relatively little about the more enabling, supportive and counselling activities and practices of frontline workers in interactions with their clients. A stronger focus on these activities and practices in future research will be helpful in creating a more balanced view of enabling and disciplining activation practices, and may also shed more light on how frontline workers combine

disciplining and enabling elements in their work (which, as many chapters of this book emphasized, is a core feature of frontline activation work), the dilemmas they face in doing so and the ways in which they deal with these dilemmas. In addition, we argue in favour of a stronger research focus on frontline work practices in the context of networking activities. On the one hand, in several countries employers are an increasingly important ‘partner’ or ‘target group’ of frontline workers and their activities but until now, little is known about how frontline workers interact with employers and how context characteristics (such as the obligatory nature of activation, new public management instruments, task distinctions between workers focusing on ‘clients’ and workers focusing on ‘employers’, or workers’ skills and competences) facilitate or hinder them in motivating and persuading employers to offer (sustainable) jobs to workers’ clients, and in realizing job placements for their clients. On the other hand, we lack systematic insight into frontline workers’ interactions with other service providers such as private welfare-to-work providers in contexts of service markets, or providers of social services in the context of activating vulnerable groups of clients such as the hard to employ, people with mental health problems, homeless people and refugees.

Despite the increasing interest in frontline activation research and its contextualized nature, systematic knowledge on how activation practices contribute to the outcomes of welfare-to-work policies and interventions is scarce. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, evaluation studies of these policies strongly focus on the effects of various activation programmes, but hardly focus on frontline workers’ interactions and interventions and how these produce (or fail to produce) certain outcomes for their clients. Based on the previous chapters and the literature review presented in Chapter 2, we consider it very unlikely that frontline workers’ activation practices and the contexts that structure these practices are *not* relevant in terms of the types of outcomes that activation accomplishes and in terms of the effectiveness of activation policies in general. ‘Being activated’ is not merely participating in a specific programme, it is also a process in which clients are put under more or less pressure to accept any job offer made to them, in which interventions and support are more or less tailored to their needs, in which clients are more or less invited to participate in deciding upon the nature of interventions and support, etcetera. For this reason, we think that frontline research deserves a more prominent role in evaluation research and that frontline researchers can make a case for this by exploring the ways in which (contextualized) activation practices and activation’s outcomes are interrelated—without necessarily limiting outcomes to policy objectives or performance targets. The latter is specifically relevant where unemployed people most remote from the labour market are concerned. In as far as there is consistency in the ways in which various contexts structure frontline work, the increasing pressure on frontline workers to focus on labour-market entry and benefit independence is probably one of the clearest examples of consistency. How this affects service provision and its outcomes for the most vulnerable groups of clients is an important research issue.

Of the four contexts that this book focused on, the occupational context has up until now received least attention. Nevertheless, the chapters in this book provide several arguments to address this issue more thoroughly: the large diversity of the educational backgrounds of frontline activation workers; the core issue of discretion, how it is used and how use of discretion is being accounted for; processes of professionalization, re-professionalization and de-professionalization pointed at in various chapters; the rather individualized nature of frontline decision making and of dealing with contextual pressures and the frontline dilemmas these pressures create. Against this background, we think that the issue of professionalizing activation frontline work (and, more profoundly, the meaning of professionalization in the context of frontline activation work) is an interesting topic for future research. More precisely, this research topic could address the skills and competences workers need given the diversity of tasks, client groups and contexts they are confronted with; the potential contribution of established professions to equip workers with the skills and competences they need in their work; the impediments and opportunities for professionalization processes; and the potential contribution of professionalization to transform the frontline delivery of activation into a less individualized project and challenge.

Last, but not least, the role and perspective of clients need more attention in frontline work studies. Although there are obvious reasons to focus frontline work research on frontline workers, neglecting clients reinforces the tendency to see clients as ‘objects’ rather than ‘subjects’ in the process of activation (compare the usual terminology of policy/service ‘delivery’ rather than ‘co-production’). On the one hand, this implies that we know little about clients’ perspectives on how activation processes are experienced and the positive or negative impact it has on their lives, opportunities and circumstances. On the other, irrespective of clients’ *formal* room to influence activation practices (which is limited), they do have an influence on these practices—we know from research of frontline workers that clients’ attitudes, behaviour and cooperation influence the decisions that workers make. Thus bringing the clients in into frontline research will increase our knowledge of activation practices as well as of the intended and unintended outcomes of these practices.

Throughout this book, it has been argued that a contextualized approach to studying activation practices informs our understanding of what happens at the frontlines of organizations and agencies responsible for delivering welfare-to-work. What is more—and some chapters made this point explicitly—the book also provided evidence that turning the knobs of context characteristics transforms activation practices and affects what activation practically *is*. This is not only the case where reforms of formal, ‘official’ policies are concerned but also goes—in a far less transparent and democratically controlled but certainly not less effective way—for other contexts. Involving contracted service providers, introducing performance management systems, changing workers’ tasks or conditions of work, reorganizing sanction procedures, increasing administrative workloads, recruiting new types of workers: all these and other contextual

changes are, at least potentially, political in that they affect what workers do, how they treat their clients, what they pursue as the core objectives of their work—in short, how policy on paper is transformed into policy practices. This is the core message of this book and, in our view, the core issue for future research: that contexts matter in shaping frontline practices and that frontline practices matter in making policies.

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