Welfare-to-work Policies Meeting Complex Realities of Unemployed Citizens

Examining Assumptions in Welfare

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Welfare-to-work Policies Meeting Complex Realities of Unemployed Citizens: *Examining Assumptions in Welfare*[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on a longitudinal ethnographic study conducted at one of the largest municipal jobcenters in Denmark. It investigates what happens when welfare-to-work policies meet the complex lived realities of unemployed citizens. I examine the nature of welfare policies, and show how these inscribe neoliberal economic discourse, which are not easily applicable to the lived reality of unemployed citizens. Findings from this study illustrate that there are incongruences between the nature of policies and the policies-in-use. I argue that these incongruences are a result of myriad of assumptions that are inscribed in the welfare apparatus, constituting tools, people, policies, and practices. I, therefore, unpack assumptions about caseworkers as well as benefit recipients, appointments they must attend, and activation programs assigned to them. This way, the paper aims at initiating a discussion about finding ways to develop policies that are better applicable to the citizen's lived realities.

KEYWORDS

activation policy / employment service / policy strategy / policy-in-use / policy frame / public welfare agency / welfare-to-work / assumptions

Introduction

Welfare states have constantly been adapting to political, economic, and social changes. The growing aging population and the effects of the financial crises are expected to increase the costs of welfare services (Christensen 2004; Vohnsen 2011). Furthermore, the neoliberal regime coupled with the New Public Management (NPM) wave has transformed dramatically the public sector, introducing market-oriented approach, increasing focus on performance management, and outsourcing public services (Kamp 2016). These rapid global changes have led some researchers to claim that welfare states have become victims of changing times, as 'the old models have become antiquated and must now become leaners and meaner to adapt to global market forces' (Ridzi 2009, p. 247). Capitalistic economies coupled with political coalitions are a strong force behind welfare state developments, and have an impact on power and resource distribution (Esping-Andersen 1990). The social democratic welfare model needs to be changed, and this is manifested in the increased implementation of the welfare-to-work policies (Jørn & Klaus 2004). While previously, welfare recipients were merely obliged to be available for jobs, welfare-to-work policies require recipients to

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remain 'active' by participating in some form of compulsory job search, training, work-based activity, or education (Wright 2012).

This marks a paradigm shift from a 'passive' to an 'active' approach to social policy, adopting a series of reforms and activation policies (Larsen 2013). While previously, activation policies referred to a qualification deficit to explain the cause of unemployment, this was later replaced by a motivation deficit model, referring to the lack of motivation or will as the reason for unemployment (Larsen & Mailand 2007). Various activation programs have been put in place, to ensure that unemployed citizens maintain their will and motivation to become employed. This paradigm shift is conveyed by expressions such as, 'work before pleasure', 'something for something', or 'with rights comes obligation' (Christensen 2004). Subsequently, benefit entitlements have transformed from being a *right* of every citizen to being conditioned by *an obligation* to either work or remain 'active' (participate in activation programs).

Prior to the current discourse, there was a shift from language of *need* to a *culture of dependency* (Turgeon et al. 2014), thus viewing benefit recipients as personally responsible for needing welfare assistance. This type of language was used by Reagan during his 1976 presidential campaign, when he coined the term 'welfare queen', in a fictional story of a Cadillac-driving 'welfare queen' (presumable African American) from Chicago, whose tax-free cash income topped USD 150,000 a year (Feagin 2000). The powerful image of the 'welfare queen' was highly influential in changing public perception and welfare policy in the United States. These images and policy changes have also influenced the welfare discourse across Europe and beyond, where Reagan's 'lazy' 'welfare queens' were replaced with less racialised images of 'noncompliant' citizens who were 'dependent' on the state and were thereby failing to become 'self-sufficient'. A more recent example is of Robert Nielsen, a Danish long-term unemployed citizen who described himself as lazy in a debate television program in 2012 and became famously known as 'Lazy Robert' (Dencker-Larsen & Lundberg 2016).

Paying attention to these images in public discourse and to their underlying assumptions is important (Boulus-Rødje 2019), because they influence both public perception about unemployment and policy design. Indeed, it has been said that 'assumptions … are key to both the design and the implementation of public policy. Policy-makers fashion their policies on the assumption that both those who implemented the policies and those who are expected to benefit from them will behave in certain ways' (Le Grand 2003, p. 2). Therefore, this study will focus on the following research questions: (1) what are the assumptions that are embedded in welfare-to-work policies? (2) What happens when they meet the lived realities of unemployed citizens? One of the places where welfare policies are realized, and where the state and its citizens interact are public jobcenters.

This paper draws on an ongoing ethnographic study (began March 2015) conducted in one of the biggest municipal jobcentres in a large Danish municipality. By focusing on the work practice of caseworkers as they apply policies during their interactions with citizens, I highlight incongruencies between the assumed reality of the unemployed inscribed in welfare policy, and the actual reality experienced on the ground. To better conceptualize these incongruences, I propose the notion of policy frames as it directs the attention toward the nature of welfare policies (meaning their assumed capabilities and functionalities) on the one hand, and policy-in-use on the other hand. Findings from this examination show how the policy's nature inscribe neoliberal economic

discourse, which is not easily applicable to the complex lived reality of unemployed citizens, thereby resulting in incongruences across the policy frames.

Furthermore, I argue that these incongruences are a result of myriad of assumptions inscribed in the different components of the welfare apparatus, constituting of people, policies, tools, and practices. I unpack the assumptions about caseworkers, as well as benefit recipients, their job appointments, and activation programs they must attend. It has been said that 'these assumptions—or, more precisely, the relationship between the assumptions and the realities of human—are crucial to the success … of public policy' (Le Grand 2003, p. 2). The incompatibilities between welfare policies and the lived-realities of welfare recipients raise the question of how can we develop policies that are better applicable to the complex realities of recipients. The paper aims at initiating a discussion about the inclusion of differentiated accounts of unemployment and meaningful interventions that address the citizens' local problems.

The paper begins by providing a brief review of key topics from the literature on public policy and social welfare, followed by a presentation of existing assumptions about welfare professionals and unemployed citizens. This sets the stage to introduce the case and methods used, as well as findings from the analysis of the assumptions identified in the field site. Subsequently, a discussion of the assumptions' implications on welfare practices is provided, followed by final remarks on future directions of welfare policy and practice.

Relevant literature

Public policy and social welfare

The literature on public policy and social welfare covers a wide range of topics, including issues related to the impact of NPM and the various reforms on welfare professions, caseworker training and heavy caseload, and funding cuts and caseworker buy-in (Fletcher & Wright 2017; Kamp 2016). Other central topics are the increasing role that municipalities play in implementing these activation policies (Knuth & Larsen 2010), as well as the dependency of the activation programs on local labor markets and private providers (Taylor et al. 2011; Wright 2012). However, an overlooked aspect is how these reforms look when enacted in practice (Lødemal & Trickey 2001). A large part of the literature about public welfare focuses on the discursive tactics used in policy and welfare programs (Christensen 200; Turgeon et al. 2014; Wright 2016), but the topic of assumptions inscribed in welfare policies and tools, and their impact on local practices remain relatively underexplored.[1] Previously, I found that the tools used by caseworkers are designed to ensure policy compliance, while providing limited support for caseworkers helping citizens obtain an employment (Boulus-Røde 2018). Trying to understand the incompatibilities between the tools and the actual realities on the ground, led me to examine the assumptions inscribed in these tools, policies, people, and practices.

Assumptions

Assumptions play a vital role in the design of policies and technologies (Boulus-Rødje 2019), aiming at fostering behavioral change of people. Schneider and Ingram (1990)

highlight how underlying the different policy tools are various assumptions aimed at cultivating change in the citizens' behavior. Assumptions also play a role in technology design, and various scholars warn against designing technologies based upon unwarranted assumptions about human behavior and action. For example, Suchman (1987) argues that we should reframe from designing technologies based on assumptions and formal 'plans', and instead design technologies that support local 'situated actions'. By distinguishing between 'plans' and 'situated actions', she argues that plans do not determine human behavior, but are rather *resources* for situated action. Moving from the field of technology design to policy design, we find similar warnings expressed in relation to basing polices on inaccurate oversimplifications of lived realities of the unemployed (Danneris 2016a; Wright 2012). Therefore, by unpacking assumptions inscribed in welfare, this paper demonstrates what happens on the ground when policies are designed based upon unwarranted assumptions about unemployed citizens.

To examine assumptions inscribed in the welfare apparatus, I borrow the notion of technological frames (Orlikowski & Gash 1994), developed for understanding assumptions and expectations inscribed in technologies. In developing this notion, the authors (*ibid.*) draw upon various related terms from social cognitive research (e.g., 'frames', 'cognitive maps', 'interpretive frames', etc.). I apply the notion of frames to policy design, and argue that understanding assumptions and interpretations inscribed in welfare policy and practice can help better understand interactions between unemployed citizens and caseworkers who enact these policies on the ground. The notion of frames addresses the interplay between two domains: *nature* of policy and policy-*in-use*. I will apply these domains to my case, and discuss their implications by illustrating how difficulties may arise in terms of policy-in-use when the different groups have incongruent policy frames. But first, let me highlight some of the key assumptions and perceptions of caseworkers and unemployed citizens identified in the literature.

Assumptions about caseworkers and unemployed citizens

As welfare professionals are responsible for serving the needs of the citizens and the states, they were typically given a high status and viewed as public-spirited altruists (knights) (Le Grand 2003). However, after the NPM wave, their role has transformed to being filled with tensions and contradictions (Kamp 2016). It has been said that both public servants and welfare recipients could no longer be viewed as public-spirited altruists (knights) and passive pawns, as they came to be viewed as self-interested (knaves) (Le Grand 2003). Nevertheless, public servants have 'constructed an identity for themselves as both caregivers and knowledgeable counselor who must discipline the clients for their own good' (Seale et al. 2012, p. 514). Searching the literature for assumptions associated with unemployed citizens results in less heroic portrayal. Unemployed citizens are viewed as 'depending on' the states, and are therefore, assumed to be 'lacking vital cultural capital [and] 'life skills'' (Seale et al. 2012, p. 514). Therefore, various policies have been implemented in order to discipline and 'activate' (Wright 2016) unemployed citizens. These perceptions rest upon a wide range of assumptions, which I will unpack later in the paper.

Case description and methods

Denmark has received significant attention from the international community for its outstanding record of social and economic performance (Larsen 2013). Unemployment in Denmark has fallen to 4.3%, the lowest rate in the past seven years (Ritzau 2016). The unemployment statistics do not include the 'approx. 3% citizens who are engaged in the welfare-to-work programmes', as these are neither employed nor unemployed (Christensen 2004, pp. 22–23). Nevertheless, the expected increase in cost of welfare services in Denmark has paved the way for various welfare-to-work policies (Christensen 2004). Denmark was among the first countries to embrace the activation paradigm, adopting a series of reforms in the 1990s that transformed the welfare system. These policies have introduced harsher economic sanctions in order to discipline the unemployed, and ensure that 'it should pay better to work'[2], the title of the Danish government's plan for the second phase of the job reform (The Ministry of Employment 2016). The use of sanctions in Denmark has substantially increased, including sanctioning citizens who suffer from additional problems beyond unemployment (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen 2015). Furthermore, the duration of unemployment benefits has constantly been reduced, followed by a general shift in activation policies to regulatory approach, requiring the unemployed to accept the first job offered, regardless of its qualities (Brodkin & Larsen 2013).

This paper is based upon an ongoing ethnographic study (begun March 2015), which takes place at one of the biggest public employment agencies in a large municipality in Denmark. It has 230 staff servicing 14,000 citizens who are over 30 years old, unemployed, and suffer from additional complex health problems. Most of these citizens have a different ethnic background than Danish, and typically have been unemployed for a long period of time. They have been described as the most complex citizens in the country. This jobcenter is a 'one-stop shop' merging local agencies to provide a streamlined and coordinated delivery of welfare services, designed to activate welfare recipients by providing 'one-stop shop' for health, social support, and job counseling (Etherington & Ingold 2012). These one-stop shops have been introduced by authorities across all Nordic welfare states and several European states in order to improve efficiency and activation (Gjersøe 2016).

I interviewed 20 frontline workers, including the director and heads of departments, professional coordinators, project leaders, a development consultant, caseworkers from different departments, job consultants, preparation planners who work with citizens referred to the special schemes, and staff from the administrative unit. In addition, I interviewed four citizens who used to be unemployed, in order to learn about their unemployment trajectory. All interviews were conducted in Danish, and quotes included in this article have been translated by the author to English. I conducted observation sessions in the waiting area and shadowed eight frontline workers (caseworkers, mentors, consultants, and professional coordinators) during their daily shifts. I participated in various meetings, and had formal and informal conversations with frontline workers, management, an IT specialist, and the security guards. I also participated in a Job Readiness course, an IT course for citizens, and a two-day training session introducing the new case handling system that was being implemented at the jobcenter. In total, I spent 145 hours in the field site. To protect the anonymity of the study's participants, all names used in this paper are fictional. I also reviewed brochures distributed to frontline

workers and unemployed citizens, flyers posted in the corridors of the jobcenter, work-flows descriptions, and training manuals. Finally, I analyzed various welfare-to-work policy reports and media discourse. This study could have been carried out using quantitative methods and relying upon various datasets, which could have shed light on issues that were not captured during my ethnographic study. However, using datasets would not have helped revealing and unpacking the assumptions behind the different data and shedding light on policy-in-use.

I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Strauss & Glaser 1967), beginning with open-coding data to uncover emergent patterns within and across data. Some of the themes that emerged from the data included legislation and political concerns, work practices related to identifying suitable activation packages, documentation practices, performance measures, and challenges encountered. After initially open-coding the data (using Nvivo), I used analytic memos to explore emerging themes (Lofland & Loland 1995). Although I did not focus on assumptions during data collection, initial open-coding revealed the centrality and pervasiveness of this topic in the data. I then applied the notion of frames, to better analyze the incongruences across the two dimensions (policy's nature and use). I will now present the findings of this study, unpacking the myriad of assumptions inscribed in the welfare apparatus and demonstrating the incongruence frames.

Findings

The 'rational economic man'

One of these central actors in the welfare apparatus is the unemployed citizen. The Employment and Integration Committee made a political decision in 2015, according to which citizens are to be divided into three target groups (Employment and Integration Administration 2015). Group 1 comprises citizens who are ready to 'leave the system' and obtain a job (e.g., through an internship, wage subsidies, part-time or full-time job). Group 3 comprises those who are more removed from the job market and require referral to one of the special schemes (e.g., Disability Pension, Flex-job or Resources, and Development).[3] Finally, Group 2 comprises those who need to participate in activation programs for improving employment qualifications. Although these categories seem rather clear when reading official policy documents (Employment and Integration Administration 2015, 2016), their actual manifestation in practice is less clear. When I asked Jenny—one of the departmental heads—about how citizens are categorized in practice, she referred to the political agreement issued by the Employment and Integration Administration (2015), but admitted that these categories are not easily applicable to their particular jobcenter, which works with highly complex unemployed citizens who suffer from multiple problems in addition to unemployment. Jenny referred to what she called 'artistic freedom', which gives caseworkers room to flexibly interpret these categories and their application. Thus, if we examine the nature of this political decision to introduce these citizens categories, these are assumed to have the capability of helping caseworkers distinguish between the different types of citizens. However, if examine policy-in-use, it becomes clear that the use of these categories is rather open to multiple interpretations.

There are different expectations of citizens attached to the above-mentioned citizens categories. For example, according to an action plan drafted for the above-mentioned political agreement (Employment and Integration Administration 2016), Group 1 citizens must obtain employment within a period of 52 weeks. To aid caseworkers in ensuring that citizens meet these expectations, welfare-to-work policies have firmly inscribed principles of punishment and reward. For example, Group 1 citizens are 'creamed' and provided with additional resources to assist them in obtaining employment. On the other hand, citizens who do not attend their appointments at the jobcenter or with their employers are sanctioned. The use of sanctions rests upon the assumption that the unemployed is driven by individual economic gain. Furthermore, this, based on a linear understanding of cause and effect, thus avoiding sanctions is something that unemployed citizens can control by attending their scheduled appointments. However, data from the fieldwork show that failing to attend these appointments was often a consequence of circumstances that citizens had difficulties controlling, for example, personal and health-related barriers (e.g., illness, anxiety, depression).

At this particular jobcenter, 30–35% of citizens fail to attend their appointments. Thus, it seems that money is not the most effective currency to motivate citizens to attend their appointments. When asked during interviews what they valued most, all citizens repeatedly emphasized how they yearned to be heard, believed, and respected. For example, Martin (35 years old) explained how he does not appreciate caseworkers dictating what he should do. Similarly, Anders (38 years old) explained that 'caseworkers must have their statistics; they have to activate the citizens [...] But this 'you must' attitude causes citizens to be defensive when they interact with the agency'. Being respected is viewed as particularly important, because they have all 'experienced being looked down on' (Samir) and 'being met with suspicion; as though one is … a criminal, a liar [or] … a thief' (Emma). Furthermore, citizens explained that 'when one becomes unemployed, one loses identity and so the belief in oneself. Self-confidence becomes something completely incomprehensible or unknown, pure gibberish' (Emma), 'because it is crushed and eliminated by the system and society' (Martin).

The unemployed population served by this particular jobcenter is varied, with different sociocultural backgrounds. In an attempt to take into account these varied identities, several personas—(archetypes) were created by the Employment and Integration Administration, to give caseworkers a taste of the rich variety of the unemployed citizens. These personas identify two main attributes, will and the ability, to determine the unemployed readiness for the job market. These attributes are supposed to help caseworkers to sort out the messy realities of citizens by putting them into categories to determine future course of action. Several caseworkers pointed out that the most difficult citizens are those who have the ability but not the will to work, referring specifically to women from ethnic background different than Danish. Although most caseworkers accept these categories, Nicole—who works with the most difficult group of citizens (Group 3)— questioned the assumption that citizens do not have the will to work. She explained that 'in the past ten years I have been working here, I met perhaps five citizens who do not want to work … All the citizens I have met have the desire to get well and obtain employment'.

Through the use of rational language (e.g., reference to the citizen's will and motivation), caseworkers end up, perhaps unintentionally, applying the rhetoric of blame, maintaining the same predefined prejudice toward the unemployed. Consequently,

unemployment is perceived as a problem for which the individual must take sole responsibility for solving. Emma (59 years old) told about how she was asked by a younger caseworker to 'get her act together' when she was depressed and unable to think of finding a job. This blaming rhetoric is based on the assumption that if unemployed citizens want a job, they can simply get one. Having a strong will is undeniably important, however, unemployment—often accompanied by psychological and/or physical disorders—tends to 'strip the individual of the will to do anything' (Emma). Unemployment affects every single aspect of one's life, and all citizens described this period as one in which they felt excluded from society, lost their identity and meaning of life.

Welfare policies are based on the assumption that the unemployed is physically and mentally fit, thus these are mostly useful in situations where the assumptions and premises apply. For example, Martin—who was suffering from depression and anxiety, had recently separated from his girlfriend, and had become homeless after being sanctioned when failing to attend his job appointment—tells of a dramatically different experience he had with the jobcenter when he managed to gather energy and take control of his life. He wrote a long letter explicitly articulating his wishes and arguing that the agency should fund an educational program that met his wishes, fit market demands, and was relatively affordable, compared to other educational programs provided elsewhere. Once he stepped into the role of a 'stable and reflective man', Martin was received with open arms, and his education was fully funded. As this example illustrates, the unemployed is assumed to be knowledgeable, articulate, and make clear decisions. This, however, is rarely the case, as citizens are often unable to articulate and communicate their needs, or are unused to doing so (e.g., they may lack the knowledge of available employment options, or their cognitive abilities may be hampered by a medical condition or by the influence of addictive substances).

Finally, the unemployed citizen is assumed to know exactly which department and institution to contact, and when. In reality, citizens speak of being constantly sent around in the system—feeling like 'rats in a maze'—unable to distinguish among the different departments and agencies. Furthermore, the citizen is viewed as an information provider and carrier, as someone who knows where and when to carry which relevant information. However, most citizens I have interviewed and observed tended to be unclear about which information was required of them, and carried typically haphazard collections of documents they had collected, either for clarification purpose or as evidential material. While there are various unclear expectations of citizens, attending job appointments is not one of them.

Time to meet again

> 'Should I come in a coffin?!? … When will you give me a break?' asks a 50-year-old retired-boxer who suffers from epilepsy, a double lung infection, uses respirator, and has just been sanctioned for not attending a job appointment, owing to being in hospital. (researcher's notes from shadowing a caseworker)

As may be seen from the above snapshot, a lot of *tension* and *attention* are associated with the job appointments. These are compulsory, face-to-face appointments the citizens have with their caseworkers four times a year. Failing to attend to these appointments

results in sanctions. Although they are called 'job appointments' (in Danish, 'job samtale'), caseworkers focus on several other aspects besides employability (e.g., quality of life, health condition, and housing). The purpose of these appointments is as ambiguous as their title. From the caseworkers' point of view, their purpose is 'either to provide a job or education, or improve the life quality of the citizen' (Ida). From the citizens' point of view, the purpose of these appointments is to 'keep an eye on [the unemployed]' (Martin), and 'to dictate to the citizen what to do' (Anders). These appointments have been described by citizens as 'a pure waste of time and money' (Emma). Furthermore, they have been compared to an exam situation, where the questions are unpredictable and the answers have dramatic consequences for one's future (Martin). One of the departmental heads compared the interaction between caseworkers and citizens to a handball game, where the important point is 'to pass the ball at the right time' (Jenny). Although this view is interesting, as it emphasizes the collaborative relationship between caseworkers and citizens, it is based on a few imprecise assumptions. This includes the assumption that there is indeed one ball that is constantly passed among the players, that it is clear to everyone how to score a point, and that the entire team will win at the end of the game. However, citizens do not view their cumbersome unemployment trajectory as a 'game' (i.e., an entertaining activity with a clear start and an end). On the contrary, these appointments are loaded with so much tension that there are guards in the waiting area, as there have been several incidents where caseworkers are threatened or attacked, citizens faint, etc.

These job appointments are rather short, where 25 minutes are allocated for both preparation and carrying out the appointment. In 2017, the jobcenter reduced the time available for these appointments, requiring caseworkers to prepare themselves only once the citizen has 'checked in' (scanned their personal insurance card). This was intended to avoid the time wasted by caseworkers preparing for appointments where citizens do not show up. Consequently, caseworkers are asked to spend no more than 10 minutes for preparation, and 15 minutes for the actual appointment. The time shrinks quickly when the citizen or the interpreter arrives late, when the quality of the video interpretation device is so poor and causing major delays, and so on. Nevertheless, caseworkers are expected to motivate citizens to obtain a job in ten minutes; a difficult, if not impossible, goal to achieve, particularly since typically three months pass by between each appointment. Furthermore, some citizens have been unemployed for such a long period of time that it is challenging to change their mindset from viewing obtaining a disability pension as the only option (Ida, a caseworker).

The job appointments are based upon the assumption that information is provided by the citizens and transferred to the caseworkers. However, the observation sessions reveal that these appointments do not involve a simple information transaction, but it rather entails a highly complex selection process, in which the caseworkers determine what information to request, and what to document. As Ida, one of the caseworkers explained, some may decide that substance abuse is a problem and demand the citizen take action, whereas others may decide to reframe from recording this in the appointment notes, as they believe that it is not a problem if it does not interfere with the citizen's ability to work.

At times, the documents provided by the citizens are deemed insufficient, requiring not only selection but also translation of information. This was the case with Matilde, a single mother (50 years old) of two teenagers, who phoned her caseworker, Maya, to

tell her that her doctor found 'lung nodules', which were causing 'reduced lung function' (Caseworker's notes in Matilde's file). Maya asked for clarification as to whether this was cancer, and Matilde explained that her doctor said he 'cannot conduct a biopsy to detect whether these were cancerous, as there was a high risk that she would not be able to make it' (Caseworker's notes in the Matilde's file). Maya printed out the letter from the hospital, and immediately went to Linda's office, the caseworker who is officially responsible for Matilde's case. The first question that Linda asked was whether 'it was terminal', and Maya explained the problems with biopsy. Trying to interpret the letter from the hospital, they consulted Patrick (a caseworker specializing in such cases), who asked 'is it 14% of the total expected capacity, or 14% reduced lung capacity?' Because the letter from the hospital contained an unclear report of Matilde's exact condition, it was deemed insufficient to determine her eligibility for a disability pension. Maya asked the secretariat to request a formal status report from the hospital, while emphasizing the need for specific descriptions of Matilde's 'actual lung capacity', her 'status and prognosis, and assessment and treatment options' (caseworker's e-mail to the secretariat). As long as the disease is not terminal and there are treatment options, one is ineligible for a disability pension. It should be noted that this particular municipality is exceptionally strict, granting eligibility for a disability pension only once all treatment options have been exhausted. Applying the policy frames sheds light on two incongruent dimensions. On the one hand, the nature of these strict eligibility criteria assumes they have the capability to capture abuse and fraud attempts, while on the other hand, examining policy-in-use reveals the local challenges that result from these polices.

The job appointments are assumed to be the central activity of caseworkers. The corridors outside the caseworkers' offices are decorated with various posters, one of which states, 'the conversation with the citizen is important'. During a meeting discussing why caseworkers fail to get more citizens into full-time jobs, Lotte frustratedly remarked 'our job is not merely to carry out appointments [with citizens], but also to answer e-mail, keep ourselves updated about new laws and packages, contact and coordinate events with other organisations …'. Indeed, the caseworkers' job entails a wide range of activities, including, preparing for the appointments with the citizens (e.g., reading the citizens' files, contacting and coordinating events with relevant internal/external actors, identifying concrete options for education/employment), responding to citizens' e-mails and phone calls, visiting citizens at their job placements, documenting activities and communicating information to other actors, familiarizing themselves with market needs, new policies, and activation packages available at different points in time, and so on. While these job appointments are undoubtedly important, the activities and interactions taking place 'backstage'—before and after these appointments—play an equally crucial role in helping the unemployed.

Public servants at the frontline

Frontline workers are viewed as playing a central role in the welfare apparatus. Although they may no longer be seen as 'knights' (Le Grand, 2003) in shining armor, they certainly see themselves as helping citizens 'find content that enriches [their] lives' (Vibeke), by encouraging them to 'get out and be part of a community … [and] … develop a connection to a workplace' (Signe). Mona, a caseworker, not only describes her job as very

rewarding but also psychologically and emotionally demanding, as they 'work with people who have problems 24/7'. She adds that people 'forget … [to] say thank you'. Mona views herself as a hardworking public servant who is helping unappreciative citizens. She explains that, for example,

> getting an early pension is, often times, not the answer for everything, because money isn't what [the citizen] needs. He already gets employment benefits without doing anything, but is still not happy. He is not realized as a human being […] He needs to try to find a content that enriches his life.

Mona describes unemployment as having a life with an 'empty content', where citizens are prevented from fully realizing themselves as 'human beings'. She also tells about how some citizens isolate themselves from the system and their family, and how the caseworkers become 'a kind of family'. Thus, some caseworkers view themselves as a 'family', which not only helps the unemployed 'become part of a community' but also help them 'realize themselves as human beings'.

Caseworkers are provided with a wide range of tools to assist them in identifying the 'right package' (e.g., course, work-based activity, or education) that can speed the healing process and get the citizen back into the job market. An example of such a tool is the 'development tool', a web-based system designed to help caseworkers assess citizens' progress. This development tool inscribes the assumption that there is always constant and measurable progress, going in one direction (from poor motivation and will to stronger intensification of these). However, unemployment in this particular jobcenter is characterized as a path with different waves and rhythms of ups and downs that the citizens go through. Jesper and Nicole emphasize the importance of adjusting tempo and timing of decision-making to citizens' own rhythms. Jesper further explains that it is critical 'to catch the citizens when they are up [motivated to work]', for instance, by 'quickly granting financial support for education or internship'. Furthermore, such development tools may have unintended effects, as these may pressure citizens who fail to demonstrate progress, encouraging them to work more, even though it may be inadvisable (Karina).

It is assumed that caseworkers are always available to respond to citizens' inquiries. However, citizens tell how they often experience that their caseworkers have not read their cases or are 'buried behind their computers' (Emma). Indeed, each caseworker has approximately between 230 and 250 cases. Furthermore, it is assumed that information is readily accessible at the caseworkers' fingertips. But caseworkers have to navigate through a vast amount of incomplete information, distributed across more than 20 IT systems and organizations, challenging their ability to conduct an adequate evaluation (Boulus-Rødje 2018).

In search of the perfect activation package

According to welfare policies, all benefit recipients must be assigned to an activation program at least once a year (The Danish Agency for Labour Market & Recruitment 2016). In an internal document outlining organizational changes at this jobcenter, caseworkers were told that the important thing is 'finding the right shelves' (Center for Jobindsats 2016, p. 1). Finding a suitable activation program is not an easy task, as there

are many to choose from and they constantly change. While this jobcenter tries to follow a citizen-centric approach, the citizen's wishes seem to constantly be overshadowed by predefined fixed packages into which the citizen must fit. A recent examination in this jobcenter revealed caseworkers tend to choose the same packages and supplier.

For obvious financial reasons, the packages are designed in such a way that they are time-limited, allowing only one package to be assigned at a given time. Augusta (mentor) expressed her frustration when her request to extend her mentorship with one of the citizens was denied, as she felt that she had only just managed to establish a strong relationship that enabled her to make meaningful progress with the citizen. This structure of time-limited packages is based on the assumption that citizens will need assistance for a short period of time to 'get them back on track', limiting the continuity of the treatment and progress. Consequently, citizens risk being assigned to countless time-limited and disconnected packages. Indeed, the lack of continuity was raised in an article published in Politiken, a leading Danish daily newspaper, which asked for a shift in focus from control, to continuity of the unemployment trajectory (Christiansen 2017).

Finally, it is assumed that these activation programs will bring the citizen closer to the job market. This linear way of thinking is based upon the assumption that citizens who are assigned to an internship will receive an offer of a wage subsidy, eventually leading to a permanent employment offer (Jens, a caseworker, explains this during a Job Readiness Training course). Thus, citizens are expected to transition from one type of position to another, making clear progress, with a gradual increase in commitment and demand. However, this trajectory is rarely experienced by citizens, who tell stories of how they are often sent from one internship to another, without securing permanent employment. Indeed, lack of employment offers is a concern that frustrates not only citizens but also caseworkers. At one of the departmental meetings, preparing for a meeting with the mayor, several caseworkers questioned the availability of employment in the market, and they voiced their frustration, asking, 'What are the politicians … doing in order to create enough workplaces?' (Written on the flip board). I have, thus far, unpacked the myriad of assumptions identified in the field site. I will now relate these to the literature and discuss their consequences along the two dimensions of policy frames.

Myriad of assumptions leading to incongruence frames

If we examine the nature of welfare-to-work policies—people's understanding of their capabilities—these are viewed as having the capacity to motivate citizens find work. Some of these capabilities are enabled through the use of punishment and reward-mechanisms to alter citizen's behavior (Handler & Hansenfeld 2007), job appointments to ensure continual follow-up and control of citizens, etc. Workfare is assumed to have the capability of reducing welfare costs, as more citizens join the workforce (Kildal 1999). However, looking into the use of workfare and its consequences reveals that there are no clear evaluations of labor market programs that can decisively answer if these have positive impacts on the employability of the unemployed without exceeding the actual costs of the programmes (Kildal 1999). Indeed, an article from *Information,* a prominent Danish newspaper, points out that 'in 2013 alone, the country's job centres cost 16 milliards [kroner], despite nearly non-existent documentation of any effect' (Gronemann 2016, p. 14, *own translation*).

Underlying these welfare-to-work policies is the fundamental assumption that participating in the activation programs is good for all unemployed citizens, regardless of their specific conditions. Yet, a report issued by the Danish National Audit (2010) concluded that the activation programs of unemployed who suffer from additional social or health problems exert no positive effect on re-employment, as less than 20% managed to obtain an employment. Similarly, Vohnsen (2011, p. 77) points out that there is no clear evidence that people suffering from serious psychiatric condition such as anxiety or stress-related depression would benefit from a part-time return to work. In fact, Wright (2012) argues that packages stimulating short-term job entry are ineffective in situations where there are fewer vacancies than job seekers. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that the assumption that work is desirable on its face is unwarranted (Brodkin & Larsen 2013). Several studies conclude that these jobcenters and welfare programs provide only minor opportunities for permanent employment (Berglund et al. 2017), typically placing citizens in low-paid and insecure jobs (Wacquant 2009). Fletcher and Wright (2017) found out that these jobcenters 'offer the cheapest support for immediate job entry' (p. 16), and that only one in seven unemployed citizens found their job through jobcentre. Indeed, it has been said that 'the use of job placement targets overestimates the scope that either recipients or advisers have to secure 'successful' job outcomes' (Wright 2012, p. 324).

The general marketization of employment services is envisioned to 'enhance respect, promote innovation, improve quality, increase efficiency', etc. (Larsen & Wright 2014, p. 5). However, this has complicated the availability of employment services, as it has led to the increased reliance on private providers who profit from outcome payments when a benefit recipient finds a job (Wright 2012). A study comparing marketization strategies in Denmark and Britain points out the challenges encountered in making these strategies deliver on their promises (Larsen & Wright 2014). I have echoed the frustration of caseworkers in this study, in regards to the lack of available job placements. These activation programs have been described as 'a one-size-fits-all activation scheme reflecting a linear causality without consideration of programme dynamics, and a very superficial focus on a one-size-fits-all outcome targeting the quantifiable measures of effects, largely related to employment as an end in itself' (Danneris 2016a, p. 18).

Caseworkers have a certain understanding of the capabilities attached to their role as public servants who carry out moral work and prevent welfare abuse (Ridzi 2009; Seale et al. 2012). In this jobcenter, caseworkers see themselves as caregivers who help citizens function in the society. Some even perceive themselves as 'family', helping the unemployed to fully realize herself as a 'human being'. Moving away from caseworkers' perception of the capabilities attached to their role to the way in which their role is enacted in practice reveals that caseworkers operate in a highly bureaucratic and politically driven organization, with constantly changing institutional demands, challenging their capability and ability to allocate suitable time to fulfil their role.

Caseworkers are equipped with tools that are assumed to have different capabilities. This includes schemes to categorize citizens, tools to measure the citizens' progress, tools to identify suitable activation packages, and tools to ensure compliance with the law. These various tools are of similar nature, as they are assumed to help caseworkers in diagnosing the citizens' needs and match them with the 'right' package to help them get back to the job market (Ridzi 2009, p. 30). However, as demonstrated in this study and in other studies (e.g., Vohnsen 2011), identifying the citizens' concrete needs is not

always easy or possible. I have noted the tendency in this jobcenter to use the same supplier and package for citizens. Furthermore, the assessments of citizens workability depend on criteria that are often hard to fulfil (Gjersøe 2016), as was illustrated with the case of Matilde, who was diagnosed with lung cancer and needed to follow strict assessments criteria to qualify for disability pension. It has, therefore, been said that 'the establishment of a holistic one-stop shop agency, which gives the frontline offices a substantial responsibility for finding individual solutions, combined with exit options that are hard to obtain, seems to represent a "mission impossible" for the … frontline workers' (*ibid.*, p. 142).

I have argued elsewhere that existing tools (e.g., the case handling system) fail to assist caseworkers in helping citizens deal with their complex lived-reality, as information is fragmented and spread across many systems (Boulus-Rødje 2018). Furthermore, the various tools (e.g., the 'development tool') assume a constant and measurable progression of the unemployment trajectory. I have noted how caseworkers in this study characterize unemployment as a path with different waves and rhythms of ups and downs, along which the citizens pass. This is in line with other studies (e.g., Danneris 2016b) who question the view of the unemployment trajectory as a predictable line of causes and effect. However, many of these activation programs are by nature time-limited, assuming citizens need temporary help to get back to the job market, thus limiting the possibility for continuity of long-term interventions.

Other tools available for caseworkers are categorization schemes, designed to help determining programs suitable for each citizen. I have discussed how challenging it is for caseworkers to apply these categories in practice and the necessary interpretations these require. Bureaucratic practice inevitably and necessarily entails a certain level of pragmatism and reductionism, to allow the categorization of citizens and standardized treatment, with the aim of treating all individuals equally (Lipsky 2010). Paradoxically, this leads to situations where caseworkers feel they work in a 'production line factory' (Maya, a caseworker), with a limited amount of resources and information; they process documents and people, passing them along on a conveyor belt, and making uniform decisions focused solely on measurable performances.

Regardless of which category citizens are assigned to, they must attend job appointments every 3 months. I noted the reduction in time allocated for these appointments and how this is based on the assumption that 25 minutes is enough for caseworkers to both *prepare* and *carry out* these appointments. The narrow emphasis on performance measures have led to a great focus on the job appointments, neglecting the importance of the activities and interactions taking place *before* and *after* these appointments. Furthermore, I have illustrated how these appointments do not simply involve exchange of information between citizens and caseworkers, but include various complex processes of searching, identifying, and selecting information, evaluating its relevance and adequacy, and translating it to accommodate legislation and specific practices (e.g., the case of Matilde, the single mother diagnosed with lung cancer). Finally, the caseload in this jobcenter is four times higher than what the Danish Social Advisory Association recommends (Balslev 2017). Consequently, it has been said that 'high caseloads … mean a chronic lack of time for face-to-face contact with advisers. Claimants report adviser interviews that were too short to be of any value … and official guidance requires snap judgements, taking "seconds", to determine whether or not a claimant is "vulnerable"' (Fletcher & Wright 2017, p. 10).

Failing to attend these job appointments result in financial sanction. I pointed out how the use of sanctions in practice was not always very effective in making citizens more compliant, and how they may lead to increased emotional distress, or to circumstances where citizens become homeless. As stated by Caswell and Høybe-Mortensen (2015), the problem with the use of sanctioning is that it does not 'address the cases in which a sanction makes the client leave welfare altogether or may lead to unintentional consequences (such as crime, borrowing money, building debt, etc.)' (p. 47). Although various studies investigate the effectiveness of sanctions, these rely on quantitative methodology with a linear understanding of causality, and fail to consider the complications that these sanctions add to the citizens' struggles (Danneris 2016a). Finally, the assumption that the establishment of 'one-stop shops' will assure a consistent use of sanctions has been questioned in studies from Norway and Denmark that found substantial differences amongst the municipalities (Gjersøe 2016).

Unemployed citizens tend to be depicted as a citizen who have many 'unused capabilities', resulting from 'laziness' and/or lack of self-discipline (Seale et al. 2012; Wacquant 2009; Wright 2012). They are viewed as individual knaves who pursue their own interest, by legal or illegal means (Le Grand 2003). These portrayals were also present in this study, were unemployed citizens felt they were treated with constant suspicion and viewed as incompetent. These portrayals lie on the core assumption that unemployment is caused by lack of will to take responsibility for one's own life, hence the need for activation programs and incentives (Wright 2016). However, if we move from the unemployed assumed capabilities, to actual capabilities on the ground, we notice that these are rather complex and limited, as all citizens in this study suffer from health-related issues in addition to unemployment.

Paradoxically, although the unemployed is typically viewed as having a deficit (e.g., in motivation or will) (Larsen & Mailand 2007), he is also viewed as a 'rational economic man'. This approach may be contextualized within an international 'incentive paradigm' that views behavior as overwhelmingly driven by individual economic gain (Ridzi 2009; Wright 2012). However, I have illustrated how, at this particular jobcenter, which struggles with a 30% rate of unemployed citizens not attending their job appointments, money does not seem to be the most effective currency to motivate citizens to attend these appointments. It has been said that the idea of the rational economic man 'has gained more purchase in policy design than empirical evidence warrants' (Wright 2016, p. 237).

Critical investigations of welfare-to-work policies argue that these enforce instrumental and rational views, neutralizing the multiplicity and fluid selves of the unemployed (Hoggett 2001; Wright 2012), leaving little space for the recognition of varied personal and structural barriers to employment. It has, therefore, been said that current welfare policies have abandoned a structural understanding of unemployment for an individualistic approach (Ridzi 2009), applying rhetoric of blame, which is supported by the language of achievement ideology and a meritocratic system in which *anyone* can succeed if they *try hard enough* (Taylor et al. 2011). Thus, the unemployed has only *one viable alternative*, namely to become a 'worker' (Wright 2012, p. 322). This view of the unemployed as a homogeneous and autonomous group of rational individuals is inscribed not only in policies and technologies (*ibid.*), but also in academic literature on social work, where 'objective criteria and randomised selection processes from administrative registers define the population' (Danneris 2016a, p. 8). Although these

assumptions have been problematised by a few scholars, 'policy-makers have pressed ahead with reforms regardless of *evidence* that policies are unlikely to have the stated intended effects' (Wright 2012, pp. 320–321).

Final remarks

As should be clear by now, policy makers, managers, and frontline workers do not have the same assumptions and views about best practices for helping the unemployed obtain an employment. The views of these different groups are rather varied, and at times, involve contradictions and paradoxes. For example, the strict activation regime in Danish municipalities has led to significant resistance from caseworkers (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen 2015). This was also the case in this study, where caseworkers expressed frustrations regarding the lack of available employment offers, the strict eligibility requirement for early pension, and so on. Thus, although managers and caseworkers have to accept the strictly regulated conditions surrounding their decision space, they develop various local strategies to manage the cumbersome bureaucratic requirements. Contradictions can be identified in visions held by different groups, but they can also be identified within welfare policy, which, for example, embeds the view of the unemployed and a 'rational economic man' on the one hand, but also as 'lazy and undisciplined' on the other hand. Highlighting these nuanced and conflicting assumptions inscribed in the nature of welfare policies and tools, and manifested in people and practices is important for acquiring a better understanding of the incongruence frames existing across the welfare apparatus. Using the notion of policy frames, I examined the assumptions underlying the nature of policy and its use. Specifically, I have illustrated how the policy's nature inscribe neoliberal economic discourse, which is not easily applicable to the complex lived reality of unemployed citizens. This raises the importance of understanding policy-in-use, in order to develop policies that are better applicable to the realities of unemployed citizens.

The one-size-fits-all approach in welfare policies makes it difficult to comply with the law (Danneris 2016a). Therefore, rather than continuing to base policies on inaccurate oversimplifications, a new approach to welfare is needed; one that is grounded in the citizens' lived experience, and that better recognizes relationships and interdependencies between and across actors, resources, and organizations. In summer 2017, several demonstrations were held by citizens protesting the impossible eligibility requirements for disability pension, and several municipalities wrote a letter asking the Minister of Employment to change the strict Disability Pension and Flex-job Reform of 2013, as it is trapping many seriously ill citizens in the welfare system for many years (Mencke 2017). We need to rethink the carrot and stick approach of moralising agency, and replace it with a differentiating agency that provides space for contextualizing the enactment of multiple identities (Wright 2012). For instance, such an approach could advocate an extension of the limited time of the job appointments and rigidness of the activation packages, providing a more flexible and holistic view, by allowing for definitions of outcomes and performance goals that go beyond immediate job entry. This demands more critical, qualitative research that captures policy-in-use, developing a better understanding of the actual practices of the frontline workers and the lived experiences of the citizens, in order to design policies grounded in these contextual experiences and practices.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

[1] Notable exceptions are the work of Wright (2012; 2013; 2016) and Danneris (2016a, 2016b).

[2] All translations are courtesy of the author.

[3] Flex-job is a scheme wherein citizens work a reduced number of hours/at reduced capacity, and the employer is compensated by the municipality. Resources and Development may be assigned to a citizen for a period of 1–5 years, to determine the citizen's ability to work.