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A personalised approach in activation. Workfare volunteers' experiences with activation practitioners

Een gepersonaliseerde activeringsbenadering. De ervaringen van geleide vrijwilligers met activeringswerkers

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ABSTRACT

In activation work – supporting jobless people to perform activities that are supposed to lead them back to paid work – a personalised approach is deemed crucial. What a personalised approach entails, however, remains unclear. In this article, we try to further develop the notion of a personalised approach in activation work, by analysing Dutch workfare volunteers' experiences with activation. Our interviews show that a personalised approach appears as a process with three stages. In the first stage, personalised means paying attention to welfare clients' personal histories, particularly their 'violated life story'. In the second stage, personalised means being sensitive to the new reality of them being volunteers. In the third stage, personalised means paying attention to the future, especially to the prospect of paid work. Our findings contribute to the theorisation of a personalised approach in activation work to which time turns out to be a crucial dimension.

SAMENVATTING

Bij activeringswerk – het ondersteunen van werklozen om activiteiten uit te voeren die hen zouden moeten leiden naar betaald werk – wordt een gepersonaliseerde benadering cruciaal geacht. Wat een gepersonaliseerde aanpak inhoudt, blijft echter onduidelijk. In dit artikel proberen we de notie van een gepersonaliseerde benadering in activeringswerk verder te ontwikkelen door de ervaringen van Nederlandse geleide vrijwilligers met activering te analyseren. Onze interviews laten zien dat een gepersonaliseerde benadering te begrijpen is als een proces met drie fasen. Gepersonaliseerd betekent dat in de eerste fase aandacht wordt geschonken aan de persoonlijke geschiedenis van bijstandscliënten, met name aan hun 'geschonden levensverhaal'. In de tweede fase betekent gepersonaliseerd dat activeringswerkers gevoelig zijn voor de nieuwe realiteit van vrijwilliger-zijn. In de derde fase betekent gepersonaliseerd aandacht schenken aan de toekomst, vooral met het oog op betaald werk. Onze bevindingen dragen bij aan theorie over een gepersonaliseerde benadering in activeringswerk, waarin tijd een cruciale dimensie blijkt te zijn.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, most developed welfare states have turned to activating policies that encourage 'active citizenship' (Newman & Tonkens, 2011). Rights to social services have increasingly become conditional on the obligation to do something in return (Dwyer, 2000). This reciprocity is supposed to produce 'active citizens' (Newman & Tonkens, 2011). If welfare clients' prospects for finding work in the short run are dim, they have to 'give back' to society. The main way to do this is by doing volunteer work. Volunteering would also make jobless people more 'employable' (Kampen, Elshout, & Tonkens, 2013).

The turn towards activation has been the subject of much scholarly criticism and debate. A common criticism is that the call for activation and more broadly for active citizenship depicts welfare state 'dependency' as 'bad citizenship' (Warburton & Smith, 2003), which would deepen stigmatisation of welfare clients (Fuller, Kershaw, & Pulkingham, 2008). Proponents of activation policies, however, argue that these give welfare recipients chances to escape loneliness and develop themselves. Mead (2008) believes that behavioural requirements, especially demonstrating a work ethic, should be included in welfare.

When it comes to mandatory volunteering as activation policy, we find the same type of debate, dominated by opponents of this policy. They argue that participants' obligation to do something in return for a welfare benefit is a 'humiliating and harassing' experience (Goodin, 2002, p. 592), which stigmatizes people as having an inferior status. Critics also argue that mandatory volunteering labels many welfare beneficiaries as 'undeserving poor', thereby 'blaming the victim' and reinforcing stigmatizing notions like 'welfare queens' or 'welfare fraudsters' (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012, p. 142). These criticisms have become louder since the economic crisis in September 2008, to which many countries have responded with austerity measures. In the light of austerity, workfare is often criticised as 'free labor' (Krinsky, 2008) and the call to volunteerism as part of the 'moral neoliberal' government project of reforming the welfare state (Muehlebach, 2012).

However, from a social work perspective, the meaning of a policy is highly dependent on the way it is elaborated in practice. Social workers – in this case, activation workers – play a crucial role in how clients understand and experience policies (Prior & Barnes, 2011). In the field of activation, when it comes to the role of activation workers, much is expected from a 'personalised approach'. Activation is considered to be only just and effective when it is adapted to the problems and needs of individuals subject to activation (Borghi & van Berkel, 2007). However, what a personalised approach entails remains rather unclear.

In this article, we want to focus on what a personalised approach implies, by analysing Dutch workfare volunteers' experiences with activation workers in the course of their activation by way of participating in volunteer work. We focus on volunteering (as a way of activation) because the tensions of activation – as both for the sake of jobless individuals as well as for society, as both voluntary as well as obligatory – are highly present in volunteering as activation. The Netherlands is interesting because it is one of the few countries in which volunteering is explicitly incorporated as a policy tool for clients who cannot find a job in the short run. We focus on the experiences of clients themselves because we think these provide the best entrance for a personalised approach in activation work, as we will explain below.

A personalised approach in activation

Activation practitioners play a key role in linking welfare clients to volunteer work. Van Berkel and Van der Aa (2012) have extensively researched activation work in the Netherlands. According to them, it is not organised like a profession with strict guidelines, criteria for professional treatment are largely absent across all municipalities and there is a lot of discretion for activation workers. Dutch municipalities vary in recruitment policies, on-the-job training, degree of standardisation of the (professional) knowledge and skills that they demand from activation workers (Van Berkel & Van der

Aa, 2012). Characteristics of Dutch activation workers are quite diverse, with a wide array of educational backgrounds, ranging from socio-cultural, administrative, commercial, to artistic education.

Critics rightly state that the absence of clear criteria causes arbitrariness and non-transparency of decisions (Van Berkel, Van der Aa, & Van Gestel, 2010). Professionalisation is often presented as an answer to this critique. Scholars understand professionalisation of activation workers as the development of systemic, reflective use of power (Nothdurfter, 2016), values (Kjørstad, 2005), judgement (McDonald & Marston, 2005), knowledge and discretion (Van Berkel et al., 2010), based on shared standards. Explication of a personalised approach serves the professionalisation of activation workers by contributing to this development.

Many scholars and policymakers agree that the best way to fulfil their role is by approaching their clients in a 'personalised' or 'individualised' way. Bloom, Hill, and Riccio (2003) argue that personalised client attention is an important catalyst in a client's activation process. Activation workers themselves also underline 'the importance of an individualised approach intended to give better support and to enhance individual responsibility and job-seeking behaviour' (Nothdurfter, 2016, p. 429).

However, when authors discuss and promote a personalised approach, they refer to common social work terms such as empathy (McDonald & Marston, 2005), direct contact (Nothdurfter, 2016), working relationally (Hall, Boddy, Chenoweth, & Davie, 2012), or respecting autonomy (Hauss, 2014). These terms represent a focus on the actual *approach*, but less on what makes the approach *personal* in the sense of considering personal actions, views, feelings or thoughts. Research often focuses on an aspect of a personalised approach and shows how this approach is obstructed, often leaving the question what makes a personal approach personal and why it is important mainly unanswered.

Many scholars agree that bureaucratic rules and regulations – in place to control efficiency and equity – obstruct such a personalised approach (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012; Hauss, 2014; Wright 2013). This is largely due to the fact that the profession of activation work is 'still in its infancy' (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012, p. 498). Even though activation workers' discretion has increased (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012), activation work is still an underdeveloped profession (Nothdurfter, 2016) in most activating welfare states, lacking shared debates on its organisational and societal position (Provencher & Richard, 2010), as well as on its body of knowledge and methods (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012; Nothdurfter, 2016).

Moreover, activation work is contradictory in itself. First, on the one hand, it has characteristics of case management with targets, efficiency and bureaucratic control. Activation workers are expected to use time more efficiently and approach clients briefly at the right moment, for example reminding them of a job interview, rather than establishing a deep bond over time. On the other hand, it also has characteristics of the social service orientation of social work (Hauss, 2014; Kjørstad, 2005; Wright, 2013). Activation workers are expected to have 'a keen sense of the issues involved', to be 'close the life-world' of their clients, and to act as a role model (Hauss, 2014, p. 666). Second, activation depends both on intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation (Larsen & Mailand, 2007).

Both these contradictions have inspired research into the instruments of activation and the interplay between discipline and empowerment (Provencher & Richard, 2010). Because of these contradictions, some see no possibilities for a more personalised approach; they argue that the monitoring side and the social service side of activation are too contradictory to be compatible (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2006; Wright, 2013).

However, most authors agree that a more personalised approach is possible and desirable. Some argue that activation needs to be modelled on social work as an empowering profession (Kjørstad, 2005; Marston, 2005; Provencher & Richard, 2010), for instance, to give clients a say in their welfare-to-work plans (Anderson, 2001). Others add that activation work needs to develop as a profession to ensure that professionals 'pay sufficient attention to their clients' when using their increased discretionary space (Van Berkel et al., 2010, p. 16). While research thus pays attention to the conditions for a personalised approach, it remains rather unclear what a personalised approach exactly entails. We want to contribute to filling this empirical void by focusing on volunteering as a

form of activation, since in workfare volunteering the tensions are significantly present, which makes the experience of a personal approach all the more telling.

We research the activation workers' approach from the perspective of clients, and aim to build on the experiences of the clients of activation workers in order to understand what a personalised approach entails. Our reason to focus on client's experiences is that we consider the person who is subject to a personalised approach to be the one to judge what makes an approach personalised. Especially with regard to activation policy, it is important to take the client perspective into consideration when developing a personalised approach, since the ideas about how to find paid employment or give back to society might vary substantially. Our research question, motivated by this added value of the client perspective, is: what is a personalised approach in activation work according to welfare clients engaged in volunteer work?

Methods

Our study is located in the Netherlands. Devolution policies concerning activation were started in 2004, when municipalities became responsible for social assistance, activation and re-integration of welfare clients. Over recent years, municipalities have increasingly turned to the notion of reciprocity in welfare: those who claim welfare benefits have to do 'something in return'. Municipalities' policy frameworks regarding this obligation differ, but all signal the obligation to do volunteer work either by appealing to moral responsibilities or possible sanctions (Kampen, 2014). Volunteer work would make people on welfare raise their chances to find a paid job.

To empirically examine the experiences of workfare volunteers with their activation workers' approach we held 125 in-depth interviews with 66 workfare volunteers in 5 Dutch cities. All 66 of them were requested to do volunteer work by their activation worker. In 2009, the 5 cities selected welfare clients with a 'large distance to the labour market' to volunteer. Their 'distance to the labour market' is in general defined by being unlikely to find a paid job within the next two years. More, in particular, this distance is defined by having psychological problems such as mental illness and addiction (mentioned by four cities); social problems (four cities), a lack of social skills, debt, lack of language skills or housing problems; and/or somatic problems (three cities), physical disabilities (two cities) or high age (two cities).

During the period of data collection, Dutch activation practitioners working with welfare clients at a large distance from the labour market had an average caseload of 113 welfare clients (Divosa, 2010). They experienced this as too high and considered around 84 clients the maximum, in order to invest sufficient time in supporting them. In general, the majority of the caseworkers met with each client once every three months (Divosa, 2010).

We relied on the willingness of municipalities and respondents to participate in our research. As welfare recipients must inform their caseworkers when they start volunteering, municipalities were able to produce lists of workfare volunteers. On our request, municipalities sent our letter to 218 people, inviting them to participate in our research. In order to prevent bias, the letter was printed on the letterhead of our university. The letter requested them to contact the municipality if they did not want to be approached; 24 people responded to this request.

We randomly selected informants from the remaining list and contacted them. In total, we tried to contact 194 people; 30 did not answer the phone and 98 were unwilling to participate, mainly due to lack of interest or research fatigue. In doing so, we tried to get a varied sample of Dutch welfare clients. We, therefore, sought to include in our sample a maximum variation in age (28–64 years), ethnic background (49 Dutch, 6 Moroccan, 4 Turkish, 1 Iranian, 1 Iraqi, 1 Chinese, 1 Surinamese, 1 Dominican, 1 Polish and 1 Romanian), gender (40 men, 26 women), years of former employment (0–40 years), duration of unemployment (2–33 years) and volunteer sector (neighbourhood: 10; cultural: 9; educational: 12; advocacy: 10; and care: 15). The main characteristic of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' characteristic.

	Category	Number of informants
Age	28–37	15
	37–46	17
	46–55	14
	55–64	20
		66
Ethnic background	Dutch	49
	Moroccan	6
	Turkish	4
	Other	7
		66
Gender	Male	40
	Female	26
		66
Years of former employment	0–10	23
	11–20	18
	21–30	13
	31–40	12
		66
Years of being unemployed	2–9	28
	10–17	20
	18–26	16
	27–33	2
		66
Volunteer sector	Neighbourhood	10
	Cultural	9
	Educational	12
	Advocacy	10
	Care	15
		66

Apart from some exceptions, like Hauss' (2014) ethnographic approach, most research so far has been based on single interviews or surveys that only give a snapshot picture of activation. By contrast, ours is a longitudinal study extended over a period of two and a half years. We held repeated in-depth semi-structured interviews with our sample of 66 individuals.

We do not aspire to generalise our findings to a larger population; with our longitudinal design of semi-structured interviewing, we aim to identify positive and negative experiences in the course of welfare clients' activation, and the reasons behind their judgements, in order to develop an in-depth understanding of what determines a personalised approach at different moments in time.

In the interviews, we aimed to find out what type of approach they had experienced, and how this motivated (or discouraged) them. This was done in order to find out if, and if so how, they had experienced a personalised approach, without of course labelling it as such. The topic list for our interviews focused on 'past and current welfare officials', 'living on welfare', 're-integration (programs)', 'volunteer work', and, if applicable, 'paid work', since we wanted to hear workfare volunteers' personal history, experiences and hopes for the future. We also discussed 'volunteer work' and their relationships with and expectations from 'activation workers', 'volunteer organisations', 'other volunteers' and 'employers'.

In order to understand what characterises a personalised approach over time, a snapshot picture cannot suffice. Instead, we kept track of the experiences of the 66 people in our sample over the course of two and a half years. We tried to interview all of them two or three times – with six months to a year in between – to find out how their experiences with and expectations of activation workers changed over time.

The interviews took place between 2009 and 2013. When we approached them for the second interview, one person had passed away, one had been admitted to a mental health institution, one was in rehab and one had moved abroad. Half of the remaining 62 persons immediately agreed to a second interview; the other half were initially hesitant. Of this other half (19 people), 7

felt that it was too confrontational (mainly because their lives had not turned out as they had hoped) and 12 felt it was unnecessary (mainly because nothing had changed). An example of someone who felt it was too confrontational was a woman who made clear on the phone that being interviewed again would confront her with the fact that she still had not succeeded to find a paid job. We nevertheless managed to convince 9 out of the 19 to be interviewed again, yielding a total of 40 respondents being interviewed for a second time. We believe selection bias to be negligible since those we interviewed twice expressed similar reservations: some felt it was too confrontational to be approached again since their situation had not changed, while others also had doubts about the necessity of a second interview, but agreed anyway.

After the second interview, we managed to interview 19 respondents a third time. Of the remaining 21, 2 had changed their phone numbers and 19 turned down our request for a third interview. Three of these 19 had reached retirement age and felt there was no reason to be interviewed again; 5 reported research fatigue. The remaining 11 perceived an interview to be too confrontational. We tried to limit the risk of selection bias by asking those who agreed to a third interview about their considerations for granting our request. While they also generally felt the repeated interviews to be confrontational, they gave priority to our research.

All interviews were transcribed from audio files and analysed with the qualitative data software program Atlas.ti. We paid special attention to workfare volunteers' experiences with and expectations of caseworkers. Below we present our key empirical findings by discussing exemplary cases. All informants are anonymised, by giving them pseudonyms.

In the following section, we discuss how welfare clients experience the interactions with their activation workers. Our analysis shows that clients go through different stages. We will present our findings by discussing activation worker–client interaction in these different stages. Based on a comparison of negative and positive experiences, we try to determine what a personal approach means in each of these stages. Since negative experiences dominated our informants' stories, we first discuss negative experiences that clients recount. By contrasting these stories with the fewer positive experiences that were also recounted, we develop a personalised approach. From our interviews, we distilled three stages, which we will describe below.

Stage 1: restoring a violated life story

As the policy to ask them to volunteer in return for their benefit was new, most respondents had recent memories of the first time they were asked to do so. This happened during the half-yearly encounter they had with their activation worker in order to discuss their responsibilities, current developments and future plans. All of them recounted that their activation worker mentioned that volunteer work would increase their chances on the labour market.

Almost all of our informants (six exceptions) experienced the half-yearly talks in general and the request to volunteer in particular as rather bureaucratic. Over two-thirds of them recounted how the activation worker presented the option of volunteer work in a rigid fashion, like in the following example of Patrick (50), a former construction worker:

> Before she [the activation worker] starts, she sums up all the articles of the regulations; what you can expect when you don't comply. I tell her: 'You better not do this again because then I will never ever come back. Then I rather receive no benefit at all and return to unruly practices'.

What was most disturbing to Patrick was that the regulations were presented to him without any regard for his past. Patrick had become unemployed due to back problems. He described himself as a 'loyal employee' who was always on time, working extra hours when needed. After becoming unemployed Patrick had tried to contact his activation worker for months, waiting for her to return his calls. Finally, he received a formal letter about the workfare volunteer policy, mentioning the rules of compliance. To Patrick, first the letter, and then his activation worker reading the regulations to him, were proofs of neglect for his long-lasting loyalty.

Michael (41), a former manager, also felt his past was misrecognised by his activation worker. When his activation worker suggested he could be a 'neighbourhood manager' (someone organizing neighbourhood festivities), he felt humiliated. Overall, such a proposal – despite the person knowing it is suggested with the best intentions – was taken as misrecognition of past experience and abilities.

> When I say, 'I am a manager', they think I'm a neighbourhood manager … They do not understand what my training is. They do their work, standard procedures. They have to wade through a file and then see if they can find something appropriate, but the rules are not made for me.

The point is not that Michael feels he deserves to be a manager again, but that he wants his past training and work experience to be recognised and taken into account by an activation worker who looks for (volunteer) work in which these qualities are valued.

In the eyes of their clients, activation workers performed standardised interviews, prescribed trajectories and monitoring, committed to efficiency, productivity and performance targets. Clients feel these bureaucratic measures are in place to make activation workers committed to serving the interest of the volunteer organisation instead of their client's interest. This made clients feel like being exploited for a public interest and often like having no other choice but to comply. Welfare clients often experienced bureaucracy as an affront to their dignity, describing their experience as being treated very impersonally, like 'a product' or 'a number'. The recollections our interviewees had of their interaction with an activation worker reflect findings of earlier studies that bureaucracy obstructs a personalised approach (Hauss, 2014; Wright 2013), but also point to what such an approach might look like.

From the more positive experiences of workfare volunteers, we can distract what a personalised approach entails. In this stage, what mattered most to workfare volunteers was attention to their personal history, ideas, preferences and ambitions. Especially when selecting a volunteer job, welfare clients wanted activation workers to have an eye for their background, their life – and work experiences; not only by paying attention to the things that went well but also to past mistakes and future aspirations: 'It is actually more important to examine what people really want, for example, people who find themselves on the wrong track. Like me.'

The most important reason for valuing attention to their past was a desire to restore their 'violated life story' (Kampen, 2014). Fifty-one of our interviewees told us they felt the need to talk to their activation worker about what their dreams about work once were, and how they were shattered when they failed at school, were fired, went bankrupt or had to adapt their life after a painful divorce. The pain caused by a violated life story lingers on.

This violated life story instilled a strong desire to restore it by paying back for help received, making up for past mistakes or by taking revenge on past employers or teachers that did not believe in them. Welfare clients whose activation workers did pay attention to their violated life story (15 out of 66) experienced the request to volunteer as more personal. Ray (53), a former scientist who had lost his job and friends after litigating with his ex-wife over the custody of their children, remembered how his activation worker was very sensitive to the fact that he wanted to make up for having missed out on helping his children with their homework. He recalls how his caseworker suggested tutoring as a volunteer:

> We have to think of something that suits you. You're not a business-type of guy, you told me. But you do like education. There are institutions in the city that provide tutoring to students. They are looking for enthusiastic people. Why don't you offer your services there?

Since his activation worker started looking for a volunteer job with Ray's interest in mind, the approach felt personal as opposed to the bureaucratic, impersonal approach experienced by others. Although Ray was in the end obliged to accept an activity, he did not experience his activation workers' suggestion as an imposition. The activity – tutoring – had personal meaning to him, as a way to accept seeing his children less often since his divorce.

The opposition between a bureaucratic and a personalised approach seems to be implicitly founded on an opposition between undignified and dignified treatment: between merely processing clients through the system versus respecting their own aims and values (Jacobson, 2009). Therefore dignity, defined as 'the bestowal of respect, which acknowledges each person's worth as a human being' (Darab & Hartman, 2011, p.797), is central to the approach that was experienced as personal.

Stage 2: being sensitive to the present, new reality

Shortly after welfare clients had started volunteering, a personalised approach turned out to be something quite different than before. Again, we will first describe the type of approach that welfare clients experience as impersonal and then go on to show what a personalised approach entails by giving a counter example.

In this second stage workfare volunteers expected activation workers to be more sensitive to their present situation by adapting to the new reality of volunteering. All of our interviewees recounted how their activation worker had contact with them in the first four months, which most of them (34 out of 40) experienced as a way to check on them. In the experience of 31 (out of 40) workfare volunteers', activation workers often lacked sensitivity for their new reality.

A prime example was the moment activation workers visited them at their volunteer job without prior notice. Workfare volunteers called these unannounced visits 'disrespectful', particularly considering the sensitivities regarding their precarious position at the volunteer organisation, including the fact that they were sent there by an activation worker. Mitchell (61), for example, had successfully concealed the fact that he receives a welfare benefit from his fellow volunteers. Until 'all of a sudden, my caseworker was there to discuss my work with my mentor at the office. My colleagues saw it, kept on doing what they were doing, but it did happen'. Mitchell felt embarrassed by his activation worker's 'surprise visit'.

Counter examples given by six of our interviewees indicate that including them in discussing how they currently perform as a volunteer is a way for activation workers to enact a personalised approach and protect workfare volunteers' dignity. Jasper (52), for example, appreciates that his activation worker makes an appointment with him and his supervisor every three months to discuss his performance: 'The way I am approached now is far more respectful. Because previously I was simply regarded as an imbecile. At least that's what I felt.' A personalised approach in this stage implies that an activation worker takes a client seriously and pays attention to his current performance, thereby protecting his dignity.

A second aspect of a personalised approach is standing by a client in case of conflicts. A recurrent theme in the interviews with a third of our informants was the moment when workfare volunteers were requested to take on tasks they felt were below their status. Especially cleaning toilets was something they experienced as humiliating. They reason that without being paid, this is not something they should be assigned to do. In Theresa's (28) case this leads to a conflict with her volunteer organisation. She believed: if work is unpaid, it should at least be meaningful; that compensates for the lack of pay. But her managers and fellow volunteers were not conscious of her sensibilities. When she turned to her activation worker for help with solving this conflict she expected him to take her side and protect her from what she saw as exploitation. However, Theresa's activation worker did not pay attention to her sensibilities. He told her: 'suck it up and get back to your volunteer job, because you don't want to risk getting a fine'. For Theresa, this was painful, because she felt she deserved respect after volunteering for a while. Other workfare volunteers felt the same way and were disappointed that when they needed help from their activation worker, they were treated as every other welfare client.

The negative experiences mentioned above point to what a personal approach might look like in this second stage: stand by the client in case of conflict, show respect for their current accomplishments and make volunteers feel indispensable. The stories of only three workfare volunteers presented us nevertheless strong examples of such an approach. Eric (55), for instance, felt

recognised as an indispensable volunteer by the attention of his activation worker when he ended up in the hospital with intestinal complaints:

> She immediately phoned me to ask how I was. I told her: 'Do you know that a whole new world has opened up for me, since you're my contact person?' She said: 'Why?' I said, 'I always felt like … I was a number. Now I feel that I am approached and treated as a real person.'

Before Eric started volunteering, his health was often a reason to keep his activation worker at a distance. As with many other welfare recipients, interest in their health often meant interest in their reasons for not working. Now Eric felt recognised by his caseworker's occasional inquiries about his health, and therefore treated with dignity.

Like in the first stage, over three-quarters of the interviewees experienced treatment by their activation worker as undignified. So again, welfare clients' dignity is at stake, but in the second stage this is because they feel they receive a standardised treatment in which their sensitivities surrounding their past or present accomplishments are neglected, in contrast to the first stage in which their dignity was harmed because they felt they were judged on the basis of present accomplishments while their past was neglected.

Stage 3: committing to the future

Having volunteered for extended periods of time changed the perspective of the remaining 19 informants on their situation. Consequently, also their expectations from their activation workers changed. Again, we will show what a personalised approach means to workfare volunteers based on recurrent examples of negative, impersonal experiences and a counter example that shows the opposite.

After being settled in their volunteer work, the satisfaction of making up for their past mistakes or failures was waning, and all interviewees started looking into the future. They started wondering whether they were still heading towards paid work, shifting from asking themselves 'I'm being helped, why shouldn't I help someone else?' to 'I'm helping others, but who is helping me?' Only 2 out of 19 interviewees were recently in touch with their activation worker to discuss how they were doing. Meanwhile, the desire to find paid employment started to predominate for all of them.

The desire to find a paid job was also returning because for 15 out of 19 informants their 'relevant others' changed. At the start of their volunteering work, most of them compared their situation with living an excluded life on welfare – a comparison that put their situation in a positive light. But after volunteering for a while, they started comparing themselves to their colleagues, who often did get paid. They now wondered: 'If they get paid, do I not deserve to get paid as well?'

However, none of the interviewees found paid work and most of them experienced little support. Supervisors at their volunteering job were hardly motivated to help them find paid work. It was in their interest to keep volunteers going and see their performance improve over time. So ironically, when workfare volunteers were best prepared to take on a paid job, they were most wanted as volunteers.

At those moments, almost all of our informants (18 out of 19) turned their hopes to activation workers. They wanted their activation workers to check on them, to see whether they were still moving towards paid employment and to support them in this direction. However, activation workers often did not show much interest in how they could find paid work, either. To most workfare volunteers, their activation worker seemed to be satisfied when there were no complaints from the organisation where they volunteer. James (48) for example, was disappointed about the number of times he had been in touch with his activation worker:

> I have seen her exactly one time! And I almost had to force myself on her to get attention, like: hello, don't you think it's time to discuss my situation?! But she probably thought: 'he's busy volunteering, so he's doing fine'.

Cynthia (43) enjoyed volunteering at an elderly day care centre, but after a while, she felt she had 'done her part' and expected help with finding a paid job. However, she had not heard from her activation worker for months and felt there was no one else to turn to, for increasing her chances to find paid work:

> What am I supposed to focus on? That is something I've learned over the years, I have to focus on something or else I will never find a job. […] I expect help with this, but I don't get any.

Soraja (38) had worked as a volunteer in a nursing home. She felt 'ready for the next step', but did not feel she was getting any closer to the labour market. She had not heard from her activation worker for a while, so she depended on her supervisors at the nursing home. These supervisors told her: 'You're not there yet, you have not learned enough yet.' Soraja sighed: 'But I cannot keep hearing that.' Soraja experienced a lack of commitment from her activation worker to her ambitions. She needed confirmation that paid employment was looming at the horizon but never got any.

So, while workfare volunteers themselves feel they deserve increasing attention for their desire to find paid work from their activation worker, such attention diminishes instead. While most of the interviewees felt they stuck out, compared to other welfare clients, they also felt that volunteering had diminished rather than augmented their activation workers' attention to their accomplishments. Consequently, workfare volunteers felt neglected.

The scarce examples of the opposite experience provide the contours for a personalised approach. Most workfare volunteers hope to be employed by the organisation for which they perform volunteer work. However, none of our respondents found employment this way. Nevertheless, we did hear two of them speak highly of their activation worker's commitment to their future. Jolanda (45), a volunteer at an organisation providing education to relatives of cancer patients, says:

> I had a good relationship with my case manager. I requested an extension of my volunteer work, because they told me there would be a permanent job. And then my case manager offered me the option to quit my volunteer job within a few months in case they would not deliver.

Jolanda was surprised by her activation worker's remark, but explained that she later understood that he was worried she would end up empty-handed. In hindsight, she experienced her activation worker's approach positively.

In the third stage again, dignity of workfare volunteers is at stake: they feel neglected, particularly when they perform well. They feel they risk getting stuck in a volunteer job with no further prospects. A personalised approach in the third-stage protects the workfare volunteer against such neglect. Instead, activation workers engage in active mediation between workfare volunteers and employers. Nevertheless, a personalised approach is not a guarantee for finding a paid job. The workfare volunteers, we interviewed understood that as well, since they did not criticise their case managers for not catering in this sense.

Discussion

By analysing the experiences of welfare clients over the course of two and a half years, we provided a deeper understanding of what a personalised approach in activation entails. Our findings have two important implications for theorizing a personalised approach in activation work. The first implication of our study concerns the issue of time. The literature on (a personalised approach in) activation seldom pays attention to time. However, a personalised approach cannot be a snapshot activity. Instead, it must be a process, responding to changing needs of clients over time.

We distinguished three stages. In the first stage, clients often enter activation with the hope of restoring a 'violated life story'. We found that, when activation pays attention to these violated life stories and supports clients in restoring them, clients, in turn, experience the request to volunteer as dignified, as opposed to the bureaucratic approach that many scholars have pointed out as undignified (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012; Hauss, 2014; Wright 2013). Personalised in this stage

means taking clients' personal history into account when 'activating' them. In the second stage, when welfare clients have started volunteering, a personalised approach means being sensitive to the new reality of welfare clients as volunteers. For instance, by including them in discussing how they currently perform as a volunteer and recognizing the importance of their contributions. In the third stage, a personalised approach is taking a person's future prospects seriously by responding to the need of finding a paid job.

The second implication concerns the relationship between a personalised approach and dignity. In the literature on a personalised approach in activation work, which we discussed in the theory section, dignity was not an explicit theme. Our study indicates that dignity deserves serious attention, especially since obligation is often assumed to be the main factor in undermining people's willingness to cooperate with activation policy (Warburton & Smith, 2003). The obligation would be experienced as disciplining and bureaucratic, totally opposed to a personalised approach. However, our research shows that the key issue obstructing a personalised approach is not an obligation as such, but disrespect for clients' dignity. Activation supports clients' employability but it does not lead to paid work, so that even a personalised approach eventually violates welfare clients' dignity. We must conclude that activation work in its current form fails and is misleading: it suggests that paid work is on the horizon, but the horizon keeps moving. This is not only true for the 19 people that were willing to be interviewed a third time, but also for those who did not want to be interviewed again, because they told us that activation already felt like a dead-end street to them.

However, this research also suggests that this does not need to be the case. It shows that activation workers miss out on chances to support workfare volunteers towards paid work. Particularly when workfare volunteers have regained self-respect and dignity after volunteering for a while, and are in a much better position to return to paid work, activation workers fail to show a personalised approach right when this is most needed. When activation workers would be much more present and actively supporting a new step towards paid work, changes to regain paid work seem to be much higher. Only if these efforts would fail too, should we conclude that activation cannot be dignified experience for workfare volunteers, in which case other ways to dignity must be available to them.

Disclosure statement

Notes on Contributors

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