The occupational context of activation work: the relative role of educational and workplace qualif cation and socialisation

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Abstract

Activation policies, understood as mandatory activation of clients outside the labour market, have affected citizens' lives and altered the frontline work in welfare offices dramatically. In effect, there are new requirements of worker competencies, raising important questions regarding the qualification and socialisation of these workers. To date, there is rather scant research on the occupational context of activation work. There is an overarching citizen expectation that frontline workers, "holding the keys to a dimension of citizenship", are dedicated to their work and conduct their tasks in competent ways, which presumably contributes to promote the overall service quality. Moreover, a sustainable welfare state are assumed to be partly contingent upon the quality of services provided in the frontlines.

With this as a backdrop, and a particular focus on social workers representing the largest occupational group in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), this PhD. project sets out to explore the relative role of educational background and workplace factors for activation workers' perceived competency and dedication. This question relates to the important and potentially policy relevant query of what matters the most in qualifying and socialising activation workers; educational background or workplace factors?

Although unable to directly address the question of work performance, articles 2 and 4 explore the differences between social workers and co-workers with respect to perceived competency and dedication. As informed by previous research, the underlying premise here is that both self-reported competency and dedication to work can be regarded as indicators of work performance and in turn service quality. The results indicated few and rather unsubstantial differences between social workers and other workers. Thus, I did not find considerable support for educational background being a predictor for neither dedication, nor perceived competency.

Given the relevance social work education has been assumed to have for activation work, one would expect them to differ positively from co-workers with regard to the desirable outcomes competency and dedication. However, potential conflicts between social work values and activation policies might serve as an explanation for the non-differences found in this thesis. In order to conceptualise the study, the first article showed that frontline managers in the Norwegian welfare offices perceive the policy objectives and implementation practices of activation policies as mild, with few disciplinary elements in which the aims are related to an overall social inclusion of clients. This conceptualisation agrees well with social work values and competency repertoire, perhaps more so than any other educational curricula

represented among frontline workers in NAV. Thus, the explanation for why social workers did not differ significantly from colleagues cannot solely be attributed potential conflicts between social work values and the values underpinning activation policies.

Whereas educational background did not have an impact on workers' perceived competency and dedication, workplace factors did indeed yield explanatory power. Articles 3 and 4 showed relatively strong associations between workplace factors in terms of learning types and job demands and resources on the one hand, and self-reported competency and dedication on the other. More specifically, frequent participation in the non-formal learning pattern workplace courses was associated with higher degrees of self-reported competency. In contrast, the informal learning patterns did not reveal significant associations with perceived competency among workers. Moreover, whereas the perception of high job demands was related to lower dedication, control and support were positively associated with dedication. The latter finding applied to all educational groups represented among activation workers.

The findings of the present thesis raises the general important question regarding the actual differences between and value of differentiated educational structures. More specifically, and in relation to activation work, despite the finding of relative compatibility between Norwegian activation work and social work repertoire, I find little support for the superiority of social workers, nor any other educational groups. Furthermore, this study emphasises the significance of the workplace as a qualifying, socialising and learning environment. Thus, ultimately, the findings of this thesis imply that in fostering adequate activation workers, the important question is less concerned with educational background, but rather how to facilitate learning and socialisation on the work site. These findings imply that the concept of occupational context of activation work would benefit from an analytical broadening by including workplace factors in the understanding of the qualification and socialisation processes.

Sammendrag

Aktiveringspolitikk, forstått som tvungen aktivering av personer som står utenfor arbeidslivet, har påvirket borgeres liv og drastisk endret frontlinjearbeidet i NAV. Dette har virkninger på kompetansekravene til frontlinjearbeidere og reiser viktige spørsmål vedrørende kvalifisering og sosialisering av medarbeiderne. Det eksisterer lite forskning om denne yrkeskonteksten i aktiveringsarbeid, spesielt i de nordiske landene. Gitt sin nøkkelrolle i borgeres liv, er det forventet at frontlinjearbeidere er dedikerte til sitt arbeid og utfører sine oppgaver på en kompetent måte, hvilket presumptivt bidrar til bedre tjenestekvalitet. Det er videre antatt at velferdsstatens bærekraft delvis avhenger av kvaliteten på tjenestene som blir fremskaffet i frontlinjen.

Med dette som bakteppe, og et særlig fokus på sosialarbeidere som den største yrkesgruppen i NAV, er målsettingen i denne avhandlingen å utforske den relative betydningen av utdanningsbakgrunn og arbeidsplassen for medarbeidernes opplevde kompetanse og dedikasjon. Med potensielt viktige implikasjoner for praksisfeltet søker jeg med dette å kaste lys over om det er utdanningsarenaen eller arbeidsplassen som har størst betydning for kvalifisering og sosialisering av medarbeidere i NAV.

Selv om avhandlingens datagrunnlag ikke tillater behandling av spørsmålet om arbeidsprestasjoner, utforskes forskjellene mellom sosialarbeidere og medarbeidere med annen utdanningsbakgrunn langs dimensjonene opplevd kompetanse og dedikasjon i artiklene 2 og 4. Sett i lys av tidligere forskning er det her antatt at selvopplevd kompetanse og dedikasjon kan anses som indikatorer på arbeidsprestasjoner og dermed også tjenestekvalitet. Resultatene i disse artiklene viste få og ubetydelige forskjeller mellom sosialarbeiderne og andre medarbeidere. Det er derfor få holdepunkter for å anta at utdanningsbakgrunn er en substansiell prediktor for opplevd kompetanse og dedikasjon blant medarbeiderne i NAV.

Gitt antagelsen om at sosialt arbeid er den mest relevante utdanningsbakgrunnen for aktiveringsarbeid, skulle man forventet at de skilte seg positivt ut med tanke på de ønskverdige utfallene kompetanse og dedikasjon. Men potensielle konflikter mellom sosialfaglige verdier og aktiveringspolitiske verdier kan forklare hvorfor det ikke ble funnet forskjeller mellom sosialarbeiderne og kollegaer. I et forsøk på å kontekstualisere studien, viser resultatene fra den første artikkelen i avhandlingen at NAV-ledere oppfatter aktiveringspolitikken og implementeringspraksisen som mild, med få disiplinerende elementer, og med et overordnet formål om sosial inkludering. Dette kan sies å være i godt samsvar med verdigrunnlaget og kompetanserepertoaret i sosialt arbeid, kanskje mer enn noen

annen utdanningsretning. Derfor kan ikke forklaringen på hvorfor sosialarbeidere ikke skilte seg signifikant fra kollegaer utelukkende tilskrives potensielle konflikter mellom sosialfaglige verdier og de verdiene aktiveringspolitikken er tuftet på.

I motsetning til utdanningsbakgrunn som i liten grad hadde sammenheng med utfallsmålene i denne avhandlingen, viser artikkel 3 og 4 at det er relativt sterke assosiasjoner mellom arbeidsplassfaktorene arbeidsplasslæring og jobb krav og ressurser på den ene siden og selvopplevd kompetanse og dedikasjon på den andre. Kursing av ansatte på arbeidsplassen som en type non-formell læringstype var klart assosiert med selvopplevd kompetanse i motsetning mere uformelle læringstyper som «skulder-til-skulder» læring. Videre viste analysene at for høye arbeidskrav var negativt forbundet med dedikasjon, mens kontroll og støtte på arbeidsplassen hadde en positiv sammenheng med dedikasjon.

Overordnet viser resultatene i denne avhandlingen at til tross for den sterke sammenhengen mellom sosialt arbeids kompetanserepertoar og aktiveringsarbeid i Norge er ikke sosialarbeiderne substansielt forskjellige fra andre medarbeider hva gjelder opplevd kompetanse og dedikasjon. Det ser snarere ut som at det er arbeidsplassfaktorer som forklarer variasjonen mellom medarbeiderne. I sum indikerer denne avhandlingen at fasilitering av faglig kompetente aktiveringsmedarbeidere i liten grad er et spørsmål om utdanningsbakgrunnen til medarbeidere, men snarere hvordan det kan legges til rette for læring og sosialisering gjennom arbeidsplassen. En teoretisk implikasjon av disse funnene er at den yrkesmessige konteksten av aktiveringsarbeid bør utvides til også å gjelde arbeidsplassfaktorer i forståelsen av kvalifiserings- og sosialiseringsprosesser for aktiveringsarbeid.

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Sadeghi, T., & Terum, L. I. (2020). Frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of behavioural conditionality. *Social Policy & Administration*, *54*(2), 219-235.

DOI: **https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/spol.12574**

Article 2

Sadeghi, T., & Fekjær, S. B. (2019). Frontline workers' competency in activation work. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *28*(1), 77-88.

DOI: **https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12320**

Article 3

Sadeghi, T. (2020). Associations between workplace learning patterns, social support and perceived competency. *Human Resource Development International*, *23*(1), 5-24.

DOI: **https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2019.1627512**

Article 4

Sadeghi, T., & Terum, L. I. (forthcoming). Frontline workers' dedication in an activation work context. Submitted to *International Journal of Social Welfare.*

1 Introduction

The topic in this thesis is the occupational context of activation work. Public sector activation frontline workers and managers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration are surveyed and interviewed regarding their perceptions and attitudes on the Norwegian activation policy and work, educational backgrounds, workplace learnings, perceptions of job characteristics, dedication and perceived competency. With a particular focus on social workers, the study shed light on the relative role of educational and worksite qualification and socialisation for workers' dedication and perceived competencies. The findings raise important questions regarding how to qualify workers for implementation of activation policies and the position of social workers in these matters. Moreover, the analytical reasoning and empirical findings indicate that analysis of the occupational context of activation work should recognise the importance of the worksite as an arena for workers' development. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis.

1.1 Background

The welfare state depends on the actions and decisions of frontline workers, operating at the boundary between citizens and the state (Zacka, 2017; Lipsky, 2010; van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012). Yet, we have limited knowledge about them and their role in service delivery (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012; Caswell, Kupka, Larsen & van Berkel, 2017; van Berkel, 2017). There is an overarching citizen expectation that frontline workers are dedicated to their work and conduct their tasks in competent ways, which presumably contributes to promote the overall service quality. Hence, our trust towards the state hinges largely on various worker attributes, among others competency and dedication, representing the core explanandum of this thesis.

Frequently denoted as the "active turn" in social policy (Hagelund, 2016; Bonoli, 2010), activation policies have been defined as "…those programmes and services that are aimed at strengthening the employability, labour-market or social participation of unemployed benefit recipients of working age, usually by combining enforcing/obligatory/disciplining and enabling/supportive measures in varying extents." (Caswell et al., 2017). In this thesis, my understanding of *activation work* is the implementation of activation policies in the frontlines of welfare offices. Activation policies, constituting a trend throughout OECD countries, have profoundly changed the frontline work of welfare offices. In effect, new tasks, technologies

and competencies are required in the frontlines. Nevertheless, we have scarce knowledge about the competencies workers in these contexts need (van Berkel, 2017).

According to Caswell, Kupka, Larsen and van Berkel (2017), the actual delivery of activation policies (activation work) is mainly shaped by the *policy, governance, organisational* and *occupational* context. The policy context refers to objectives, instruments, target groups and the mix of enabling and demanding elements in activation. Relatedly, the governance context is the organisation of activation work and the structure between agencies and actors involved in policy delivery. Management of activation work is the primary focus of the organisational context assumed to shape frontline workers in their execution of activation work.

Finally, the occupational context refers to the training of workers, the impact of professionalism and how these issues influence workers' treatment of clients. It is this occupational context that constitutes the central exploratory theme in this thesis. Among the various contexts of activation work, the occupational context has attracted the least scholarly attention (van Berkel, 2017) leaving extensive knowledge gaps within this topic. Due to the assumed impact the occupational context might have on frontline workers' service provision, this topic should be subjected to empirical explorations more thoroughly. In addition, as far as this occupational context is concerned with training and qualifications for the tasks in the activation frontline, the analytical framework of the occupational context should be broadened by also including the workplace as a potentially important arena for workers' qualification and socialisation. Indeed, in the interdisciplinary research fields of professions, higher education and workplace learning there is a common agreement that qualification for a given occupation takes place not only through the educational system, but also in the workplace (Mausethagen & Smeby, 2017; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Tynjälä, 2008).

As previously noted by several observers, there are vast variations across national models with regards to the policy objectives of activation policies (Eichhorst, Kaufmann, Konle-Seidl & Reinhard, 2008; Watts & Fittzpatrick, 2018) and accordingly the ways activation work is organised and carried out, and services provided (van Berkel & Knies, 2018). Hence, exploration of the occupational context and the potential for professionalization of activation work should not be abstracted from contextual features (Nothdurfter, 2016).

As the investigations of the occupational context of activation work in this study are undertaken in Norway, it is vital to shed light on how the policy objectives are conceptualised in the frontline. To date, there is quite limited knowledge on the Norwegian case in these regards as the research literature have been heavily dominated by authors stemming from

Anglosphere and Continental European countries. What we do know however, is that traditionally, in the Scandinavian countries social workers have had a dominant role in implementing social policy (Meeuwisse, 2009; Thoren, 2008). Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, little is known about the potential compatibility between social work ideals on the one hand, and social policy work context in general, and activation work specifically on the other. From within an American activation policy and work context, Hasenfeld (1999; 2010) has made a rather strong case for the incompatibility between social work repertoire and activation work. Nonetheless, due to the assumed[1] as well as unknown differences between the US and Norwegian activation context, the generalisability of his observations are questioned. Thus, what is needed in order to determine the relationship between social work and activation work, is an examination of the specific policy and work context in Norway. Likewise, as the social work profession has had differentiated developmental paths across countries and regions, this too should be explored in proximity of its contextual features.

1.2 The occupational context of activation work: higher education and the workplace as arenas for qualification and socialisation

The above elaborations reflect the broader debate on how to qualify and socialise potential and current activation workers. Qualification is related to the acquisition of skills and knowledge necessary for conducting certain tasks and is intended to increase the individual's productive capacities (Teichler, 1999). Socialisation refers to the process in which individuals become a member of a group or community by acquiring certain non-cognitive aspects of competency, such as appropriate behaviour, attitudes and motivations (Parsons & Platt, 1973). As the development of professional and other vocational expertise requires different and integrated kinds of knowledge, a common agreement regards the necessity of both education and workplace learning (Eraut, 2004; Tynjälä, 2008). In this thesis, I generally refer to the former as *educational qualification and socialisation*, and the latter as *workplace qualification* and *socialisation.*

In the general educational research literature, it is often assumed and even postulated that educational training equips students with certain generic skills and knowledge which in turn serve a preparatory purpose in that it lays the initial foundations for further professional

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[1] As will be elaborated on below, Norwegian social workers, as opposed to the American, have had tight connections to authorities due to their employment relationship (Meeuwisse, 2009).

development in the workplace (Eraut, 2004). Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there is limited knowledge about the relative role and importance of educational and workplace qualification and socialisation for competency development in the specific context of activation work. Some research exists however on the missing link between education and practice, referring to a gap between the competencies needed for a given workplace and the ones acquired through school-based education (Tynjälä, 2008; Benner, 1982). These findings are frequently related to practice shock and interpreted in terms of the higher education setting's inability to sufficiently prepare students for work.

In relation to this thesis, the question is what exactly is the significance of educational type and length in preparing for activation work? More specifically, it is questioned whether it matters to recruit persons with higher education as opposed to those without such training. Moreover, with a focus on social workers, I ask whether type of educational background makes a difference to the issues of perceived competency and dedication. Further, the thesis addresses the workplace as a qualification and socialisation arena. The central question here is to what extent diverse workplace learning types and working conditions foster competent, self-assured and dedicated workers. On the basis of the analytical frameworks of workplace learning and Job Demand and Resources model, I intend to investigate the relationships between these variables on the one hand, and perceived competency and dedication among frontline workers in local NAV-offices on the other.

1.3 Aims and research questions

The main purpose of this thesis is to provide a better understanding of the occupational context of Norwegian activation work, and to shed light on the relative role of educational and workplace qualification in fostering competent and dedicated workers. The study can contribute to enhance our understanding regarding how activation work in Norway is conceptualised, and accordingly who to recruit, and how to facilitate worker development in the workplace.

The overall research question for this thesis is:
What is the relative role of educational and workplace qualification and socialisation for activation workers' perceived competency and dedication?

More specifically, I aim to illuminate whether it is workers' educational backgrounds or their differential experiences within the worksite (learning patterns and perceived job characteristics) that explain variations in perceived competency and dedication to work. When addressing the role of educational background in the specific context of activation work, it is decisive to examine how the work is perceived in the frontlines of the specific national model, which in this case is the Norwegian. This clarification would also shed light on the compatibility between social work education, the largest educational group and presumably the most relevant educational background, and activation work.

Last, but not least, representing a novel contribution to the literature on the occupational context of activation work, the role of the workplace as a qualification and socialisation arena will be addressed.

Figure 1 Conceptual model displaying key variables of the study
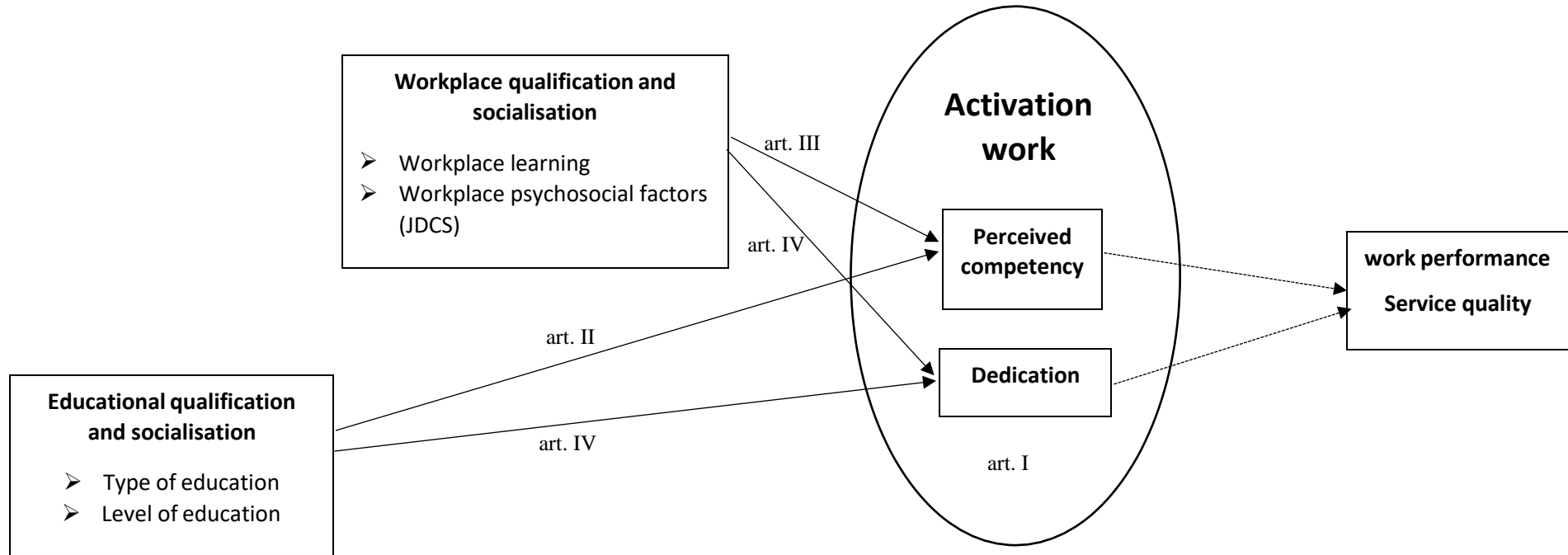
Note. This conceptual model aims to display the key variables of this thesis, both independent (educational and workplace qualification and socialisation) and dependent (perceived competency and dedication). Moreover, the model illustrates the assumed directions of the explored relationships between the bulk of independent and dependent variables. The circle marked "activation work" constitutes the context of the study. The numbers on the lines specify the particular article in which the assumed relationships are examined. The slight left shift location of the educational qualification and socialisation box is due to its often assumed chronological primacy in relation to workplace qualification. Stripped lines far right in the model indicate that work performance and service quality are not included variables in this study. However, as previous research have demonstrated that perceived competency and dedication are among the antecedents of both work performance and service quality, these assumed connections are meant to show the potential policy relevance of this thesis.

Table 1. Overview of the study's articles: research questions, data and findings

Title	Research questions	Empirical data	Main findings
Article 1 Frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of welfare conditionality	How do managers perceive and justify welfare conditionality?	Focus group interviews	Managers adopt a broad definition of activation policies, meaning overall social inclusion of clients. They perceived this policy to be mild and client sensitive and justified it with paternalistic defences.
Article 2 Frontline workers' competency in activation work	What are the dimensions of activation competency? Are there differences between social workers and colleagues with regard to perceived competencies?	Survey data	Activation competency consists of the distinct underlying dimensions of user-oriented competency and market-oriented competency. Social workers are mostly similar to co-workers in their competency scores. However, they report slightly lower market-oriented competency.
Article 3 Associations between workplace learning patterns, social support and competency	How do frontline workers learn at work? Are there different associations between the various learning patterns and perceived competencies? Does social support moderate these relationships?	Survey data	Informal guidance is the most frequently used learning pattern. This learning type is also weakest associated with perceived competency. The non-formal learning type of workplace courses displayed the strongest association with perceived competency. Associations between learning patterns and competency were stronger for those who experienced higher degrees of support.
Article 4 Social workers' dedication in an activation work context	What is the association between job demands and resources and dedication in the context of activation work? Are social workers' degree of dedication to work different from co-workers?	Survey data	All frontline workers are highly dedicated to their work. Control and support appeared as the most salient predictors of all workers' dedication. Social workers did not differ in level of dedication from workers with other educational backgrounds.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

In this introductory chapter, I have introduced some of the central concepts applied in this thesis and presented the study's aim and specific research questions. The following chapter (2) seeks to provide the analytical and theoretical frameworks deemed relevant to the study, and simultaneously presents the empirical foundations on which these frameworks are built. In order to contextualise the thesis, chapter 3 designates the Norwegian case where the study is undertaken. Chapter 4 gives an overview over methodological issues, including descriptions of data, analysis and discussions of some of the strengths and weaknesses of the study. In chapter 5, the results and discussion points of the four articles comprising this study are summarised. Finally, chapter 6 offers elaborate discussions of the findings of the study together with considerations of the possible implications for further research and practice.

2 Theoretical perspectives and prior research

In this theory and prior research section, I intend to provide an account of pertinent theoretical concepts in addition to a review of relevant prior research. I start with a brief overview of the occupational context of activation work. Here I propose an analytical broadening of this concept. Next, I turn to the policy context of activation work. This is important for the understanding of the work setting in focus in this thesis. Subsequently, the outcome variables perceived competency and dedication to work will be presented. Finally, I attempt to shed light on theoretical perspectives and prior research with respect to educational and workplace qualification and socialisation, representing the two broad independent variables in this thesis.

2.1 The occupational context of activation work – broadening the concept

According to Caswell et al. (2017), the occupational context of activation work is concerned with three inter-related issues. First, it refers to the professional training of frontline workers. Due to the lack of a clear professional profile, activation workers are a rather heterogeneous group, making this field of study complex and all the more interesting (van Berkel, 2017). Further, the occupational context also refers to the role of professional associations in policy making and implementation, and the impact of professionalism on service provision and treatment of clients.

Two strands of research have dominated the current literature on the occupational context of activation work (van Berkel, 2017). The first issue has been concerned with the debate on what kind of work activation constitutes, more specifically the mix of professional and bureaucratic elements in activation work. As will be accounted for below, this literature is characterised by a blissful mix of analytic (how things are / should be conceptualised as), normative (how things should be) and empirical (what do data tell us about how things are) work.

The second issue in scholarly debates on the occupational context of activation work regards the position of social work in this specific work setting (van Berkel, 2017). Two main considerations can be identified here. Whereas the first questions the compatibility between social work values and activation work (both in terms of governance structures and the underlying ideology), the second involves empirical explorations of the impact of educational

background on workers' practices, attitudes and competences, with a particular focus on social workers.

It is partly this latter issue regarding the position of social workers in the occupational context of activation work that has formed the basis for the research question in the thesis at hand. As noted previously, this context of activation work has received the least research attention compared to the other three contexts of policy, governance and organisation (Caswell, et al., 2017). This research literature is thus inconclusive and insufficient for the purposes of saturated theoretical understandings. The occupational context deserves more scholarly attention due to its assumed impact on frontline workers' agency and in turn actual practices.

Traditionally, the concepts of learning and qualification for certain tasks have been linked to formal education. However, nowadays there is a wide agreement that the workplace constitutes an important arena for qualification and socialisation (Kyndt, Dochy & Nijs, 2009; Mausethagen & Smeby, 2017; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Tynjälä, 2008). Accordingly, workplace learning as a field of research has gained wide-ranged and interdisciplinary scholarly attention during the past few decades. Nonetheless, scholarly debates, theorising and empirical investigations of the occupational context of activation work, clearly concerned with workers' qualification and socialisation have lacked an explicit focus on the role of workplace factors, both analytically and empirically. Indeed, the educational setting cannot be regarded as the sole arena in which workers' views, attitudes, preferences, competencies and work motivations are shaped and developed. The workplace can plausibly serve as an equally powerful ground for these issues.

Although workplace factors, such as conditions of work have had a central place in the scholarly exploration of the organisational context of activation work, these conditions would have another position and impact when examined within the realms of the occupational context. For instance, workload can be studied in relation to both the organisational and the occupational context. While in the former context, the influence of workload on coping strategies would be an interesting topic of inquiry, from an occupational context perspective it would rather be interesting to study the impact of workload on learning motivation and competency development. Notwithstanding the intimate relationships between these contexts, the analytical distinctions are nonetheless fruitful. Moreover, workplace learning as an important training and qualification aspect has, to the best of my knowledge, been neglected in examinations of the occupational context of activation work. In this thesis it is attempted to

broaden the occupational context of activation work by recognising the potential impact of workplace factors.

2.2 Activation policy

Over the past decades, the western world have witnessed an increasing emphasis in social policies on mandatory activation of a wide range of unemployed people. A myriad of terms, such as workfare, welfare-to-work, welfare conditionality, behavioural conditionality and activation policies have been used to denote approximately the same phenomenon. There are however some cross-national differences on term preference. For example, whereas workfare is most frequently used within the American scholarly literature, welfare-to-work is more typical in the European literature. As no consensus regarding single definitions of these terms exist, they are often applied interchangeably. However, what seems to be a common feature of these terms is the conditioning of benefit receipt.

Clasen and Clegg (2007) argue that social benefits have rarely been unconditional and they make a useful distinction between three levels of conditionality operating within welfare states. While the first level refers to membership of a defined category of support (category), the second is related to eligibility and entitlement criteria (circumstance). Finally, subsequent to the others, conditions of conduct is intended to regulate the ongoing social support. In other words, it pertains to the ongoing activity requirements for benefit receipt, and non-compliance often results in more or less severe economic sanctions. Constituting the focus in this thesis, it is this tertiary level of conditionality that has been denoted the "new welfare state" or the "active turn", and has gained ample scholarly attention in recent years. In accordance with the definition offered by Caswell, Kupka, Larsen and van Berkel (see page 4 in the thesis at hand), I understand activation policies as the conditioning of benefits upon activity requirements. The terms activation policies and conditionality are used interchangeably in the papers, but both refer to the same phenomenon. Further, activation work is understood as the implementation of activation policies.

Conditioning of benefits may apply for several benefit schemes and the political vision is usually to encompass everyone (Eichorst, Konle-Seidl, 2008). Thereby, we have witnessed a tendency towards subjecting ever wider target groups to the principle of activation (van Berkel, 2019). The legislations underpinned these schemes usually vary, and the target groups differ along several dimensions such as remoteness to the labour market. In addition, cross-

national variations in the structure of benefit schemes and legislations regarding activation make comparisons challenging. These differences might have significant implications for activation work being the topic of this thesis. However, as will be shown below, there are also some commonalities that to some extent unite these diverse types of activation regimes across benefit schemes, target groups and national models. Hence, to some degree, this allows me to shed light on the research question posed in this thesis abstracted from these particularities.

2.2.1 Activation work – variations and commonalities across nations

This activation turn in social policy is changing the nature of frontline work in several ways, fundamentally altering the role of frontline workers, constituting a re-design of work life and task portfolio for street-level bureaucrats in the welfare state. It has been argued that the role of frontline workers in the welfare state have been transformed into "a considerable more political, normative and ethical one" (van Berkel, van der Aa & van Gestel, 2010, p. 449). Lipsky's well-known claim of street-level bureaucrats holding "the keys to a dimension of citizenship" has gained ever more validity in this scenery. Across national models, there are both commonalities and differences in the scope, intensity and character of activation work. The next sections will provide an account of these issues.

2.2.2 Cross-national differences in the design and conditions for activation work

For starters, in addressing the nature of frontline work, the recognition of varieties across national models and even within-country differences (Caswell & Larsen, 2017) is essential. As activation policies reflect a variety of conceptualisations, one should not talk of activation *tout court* (Sabatinelli, 2010). Indeed, what kind of work activation actually is depends on several issues regarding the policy, governance, organisational and occupational context. Therefore, activation policies and work should be studied in a context-specific manner (Geiger, 2017; Grant, 2011). In the next sections I provide a brief overview of the most salient variety aspects assumed to have an impact on conceptualisations and the actual conduct of activation work.

Ideological drivers

The ideological drivers underpinning activation policies vary across nations. Although these drivers are often rather ambiguous marked by conflicting motivations and expected outcomes (Thoren, 2008) attempts have been made to portray cross-national differences. In clear alignment with Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology, Daguerre (2007) distinguishes between three schools of thought which she denotes the "three worlds of activation" (p.4), namely the human capital approach, the social integration strategy and the liberal tradition. Whereas the former two models share several similarities[2], the liberal tradition differs profoundly in many ways.

The human capital and social integration approach, most prevalent in the Nordic and some Continental European countries insist that structural barriers faced by those outside the labour market constitute the main explanations for social exclusion (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001). The unemployed lack the skills and qualifications appreciated in the knowledge society and should therefore be dealt with by skill-enhancing measures in order to improve their employability (Halvorsen & Jensen, 2004; Dahl, Boesby & Ploug, 2002; Esping-Andersen, 2002). In stark contrast, the liberal tradition, commonly found in Anglosphere countries, emphasise voluntary unemployment as the core explanation for worklessness. Thus, from this perspective, unemployment is portrayed as a behavioural infirmity on the individual level, such as lack of work motivation (Mead, 1992; Murray, 1984), rather than structural deficiencies (Daguerre, 2007). The practical implication of this school of thought in welfare policy has been the work-first approach, as we know it from the contemporary UK and US welfare policy context, in which the unemployed are forced into the labour market by means of sanctions and incentives.

Behavioural requirements, monitoring and surveillance

Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018) uphold that the constituent features of welfare conditionality (activation policies) are behavioural requirements, monitoring and surveillance processes and sanctions. Further, these authors suggest that cross national variations should be understood along these three axes. Behavioural requirements can range from time-intensive and onerous to simpler requirements. Monitoring processes also vary between national models on how

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[2] Despite several similarities between the human capital and social integration approach, within the latter strategy most prominent in France, the idea of minimum income have surfaced in the public debate. The emphasis in the human capital approach, originating from Sweden, has rather been on employability enhancement through training (Daguerre, 2007).

intrusive they are, for example whether it is based on self-reports or documentation and evidence. Finally, it is argued that sanctions as the most distinctive element of activation policies varies across nations in magnitude, timing and duration. For instance, in the harshest sanctioning regimes like the US and UK, benefit receipt can cease for a period of three years in case of non-compliance. Norway and Sweden, on the other hand have been found to adopt milder sanctioning regimes (Eleveld, 2017).

As a means to grasp cross-national differences in activation policies, a common ideal typical distinction is between enabling and demanding policies (Eichhorst, Kaufmann & Konle-Seidl, 2008; Bonoli, 2013; Fossati, 2018; Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl, 2008). Demanding policies places more demands on individual behaviour in terms of stricter eligibility criteria, activity requirements (such as job search) and harsher sanctioning regimes. Thus, by making social benefits less attractive, the objective here is to abbreviate unemployment duration. On the other hand, enabling policies put greater emphasis on human capital investments by improving skills and employability. This distinction is highly ideal typical and so most countries combine elements of both enabling and demanding policies (Fossati, 2018). However, nations vary in the differentiated emphasis they put on either enabling or demanding elements of activation policy. For example, while UK and United States are recognised as country models with extensive reliance on demanding elements, the Scandinavian countries on the other hand put more weight on enabling elements (Dingeldey, 2007; Fossati, 2018).

Closely related to the distinction between demanding and enabling, several other dichotomous typologies have been proposed. Another distinction of particular interest for the purposes of this thesis is that between broad and narrow activation (Øverbye, 2000; Sabatinelli, 2010). Slightly different from the distinctions mentioned above, this distinction refers to the objectives of activation. While the broad definition of activation denotes an objective of wide integration in different types of social communities, the narrow definition refers to the single aim of labour market integration.

Privatisation and marketization

During the past few decades, marketization, meaning the outsourcing of services to private for-profit and non-profit providers, has been a general trend in the provision of activation services throughout OECD countries (van Berkel, Sager & Ehrler, 2012). Due to both similarities and differences between conventional markets and the ones providing social services, Le Grand (1991) and subsequently other scholars (e.g. van Berkel, 2014; Considine,

Lewis & O'Sullivan, 2011) rely on the concept of quasi-markets in order to understand markets providing social services. These quasi-markets are markets because state providers outsource services to actors competing with each other. However, they are not necessarily private nor for-profit organisations. Further, purchase of these services are usually performed by core public agencies instead of directly by consumers/clients. Moreover, despite the outsourcing of services, the state represents the primary financing actor.

Scholars have emphasised cross-national variations in the scope and character of service marketization. Whereas in some countries, like UK and previously also the Netherlands , marketization of these services have been widespread, other countries like Italy and France have to a lesser extent relied on outsourcing of activation services (Sainsbury, 2017; Caswell et al., 2017). Also, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration buys activation measures from both for-profit and non-profit providers (Jantz, Reichborn-Kjennerud & Vrangbaek, 2015). However, there are reasons to believe that marketization of activation services in Norway is not as far-reaching as for instance in the UK. In addition, tendencies towards partial de-marketization, in which services previously outsourced are currently provided by workers in the NAV-offices, have been witnessed through for instance the project "Core tasks in the NAV-office"[3]. Thus, a substantial portion of the activation services are provided in-house by frontline workers in NAV.

Service integration

Service integration has been a general trend during the past few decades. In many countries, various services have merged into so-called one-stop-shops in order to promote employability and counteract welfare state fragmentation. However, the actual degree and nature of service integration varies across national models (Minas, 2014; van Berkel, 2010). Some countries, like for instance Sweden has not even undergone such service integration reforms and lack one-stop shops (Heidenreich & Aurich-Beerheide, 2014). In some countries, like the Jobcentre Plus in the UK, the agencies integrate income protection and activation; while in others countries service provision for the insured and uninsured unemployed people are integrated (van Berkel, 2010).

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[3] The "Core tasks in the NAV-office" project (Kjerneoppgaver i NAV-kontor) was a three year long trial project (2012-2015) initiated from the Ministry of Labour and Social affairs aiming to assess whether needs clarification and follow-up of clients performed by the NAV-offices can ensure a more comprehensive and cost effective labour market-oriented user follow-up. Evaluation of the trial showed desirable results (Spjelkavik, Mamelund & Schafft, 2016) and the scheme was later continued and implemented in normal operation.

According to Minas (2014), two different types of one-stop shops may be identified; single purpose and multipurpose one-stop shops. In countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, single purpose one-stop shops have been established with narrow task profiles and focus on one policy domain (Minas, 2014). At the other end of the continuum, LAFOS in Finland and NAV in Norway (see more details regarding the NAV-reform in chapter 3 of this thesis) are viewed as comprehensive multipurpose one-stop shops providing support from several policy sectors (Minas, 2014). Regardless of the between country differences, service integration has arguably implications for governance structures and accordingly, frontline activation work.

Traditional vs integrated model

The tasks of frontline workers also vary across national models. One such dimension is that of task specialisation. In the traditional model provision of activation services is separated from benefit administration and sanctioning. The integrated model, on the other hand, involves the integration of these two tasks (Hill, 2006). Although there are local variations within country models (like for instance the Netherlands), some countries like Italy and the UK rely mostly on the traditional model, whereas others like Poland and France on the integrated model (Caswell et al., 2017). In the municipal division of the Norwegian NAV, benefit administration/sanctioning (social assistance) is fully integrated with activation services. In the state division however the picture is not straightforward. Formally, benefit administration and sanctioning (social insurance benefits such as temporary disability benefits and unemployment benefits) are outsourced to other non-frontline public special state units in NAV (forvaltningsenheter) (Røysum, 2012) outside the NAV-offices. However, frontline workers in NAV-offices are nonetheless very much involved in decisions regarding benefit administration and sanctioning by close communications with the non-frontline special units. Thus, the tasks of most workers in NAV-offices are in close alignment with the integrated model.

The intertwining of benefit administration and activation services cultivates organisational cultural changes, new definitions of what workers do, introduces supplementary tasks, and creates new tensions. Frontline workers must assess clients' work ability and future prospects on the labour market, make eligibility assessments, ascertain that they comply with activity measures and make sure that they are sanctioned when they fail to do so.

Discretionary decision making

According to van Berkel (2017), comparative studies show that the discretionary room for frontline workers differ across countries, as well as between various security systems within countries. For example, Jewell (2007) found that in Sweden, a country with a relatively large portion of social workers in the frontlines of welfare offices, the discretionary room for decision making is more substantial than in Germany. In addition, polish studies reveal wide discretionary powers granted to the social workers in the context of activation work. Also, studies undertaken in Norway show that there is a rather wide discretionary space delegated to the frontline workers (Andreassen, 2019; Jessen & Tufte, 2014) although there are reasons to assume that the discretionary capacities on the municipal part of NAV-offices are greater than those working in the state part (Jessen, 2011). In sum, these studies indicate that the extent of frontline discretionary capacities are intimately related to the proportion of social workers providing services. Whether there is a direct causal relationship in this regard or a more complex association involving other variables such as degree of professionalism and regulatory codifications remains an unexplored empirical question.

With trends such as individualisation and decentralisation aiming at tailoring services to local and individual circumstances, inevitably transforms the nature of discretionary capacities in the frontlines. With the transformation of the welfare state and resulting particular changes of the frontline activation work, the question remains, what is the actual nature of frontline activation work.

2.2.3 Characteristics of frontline activation work

Despite gross cross-national variations in activation policies and work, there are nevertheless some transboundary features constituting the core of frontline activation work. Illuminating the nature of this kind of frontline work is crucial for understanding what activation policies really mean on the ground and thereby the implications for the occupational context. The nature of frontline activation work is a complex and multifaceted one (Hasenfeld, 2010), fraught with inherent tensions. The question is, regardless of the many cross-national variations and within-country differences, what are the specific characteristics of this particular kind of work? In this section, I will argue that several distinct features constitute the very heart of frontline activation work.

Face to face interaction with citizens/clients. According to Lipsky (2010), public welfare offices represent a typical example of street level bureaucracies in which workers have daily

face to face encounters with clients, making the worker-client relationship personal and emotional. Nevertheless, these relationships are characterised by unequal power relations. The worker control resources and opportunities in terms of providing or denying access to welfare state provisions, and as such "hold the keys to a dimension of citizenship" (Lipsky, 1980, p. 4). In a similar vein, Hasenfeld (2010) places the worker-client relations at the core of activation work and argues that these relations are a key determinant of service effectiveness.

Discretion. Although street level bureaucrats occupy the bottom rung of the hierarchy, they have nonetheless substantial discretionary powers (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). Like in many other street level bureaucracies, a defining feature of frontline activation work is indeed the room for discretionary decision making and thus contributing to policy making (Lipsky, 2010; Caswell et al., 2017). Discretion can be defined as "the power….to make a choice among possible course of action" (Davis, 1971, p.4). Although some aspects of it are disputed, there seems to be an agreement among scholars that discretion in the frontlines are inevitable and as such workers are conceptualised as de facto policy makers (Lipsky, 2010; Hasenfeld, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; van Berkel et al., 2017). The inevitability of discretion stems from the notion that rules cannot universally fit each individual and her circumstance, thus discretionary judgements must be made on the street level.

Rules and procedures. Despite the inevitability of discretionary decision making in frontline work, the workers are bound by a long tether of rules and procedures. This is indeed an inherent aspect of bureaucratic work (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). Frontline workers are mediators of policies in the sense that they implement formal policies by adhering to rules like for instance primary legislation in Acts of Parliament. However, as rules often comprise ill-defined concepts such as "essential" and "reasonable", exercise of discretion is necessary in order to transform these rules into practices (Sainsbury, 2008).

Conflicting logics. Given the complex statutory mandate granted welfare offices and frontline workers, at least two types of rationalities, arguably incommensurable rationalities are warranted (Mashaw, 1983). Bureaucratic rationality, rule-oriented in nature, is needed in order to distinguish between false and true claims of benefits and services. Equality before the law is considered an ideal in bureaucratic work. For the bureaucrat, the clients are transformed into cases that should be processed according to the same rules. Decision making, especially with respect to income provision, should be both accurate and cost effective. The

ideal conception of bureaucratic rationality involves a) to identify the meaning of a given rule, b) determine the legally relevant facts of a particular case, and c) application of the rule to the factual case. Being a system of correctness, the ultimate goal imbedded in bureaucratic rationality is to "minimize the sum of error and other associated costs" (Mashaw, 1983, p. 25).

On the other hand, inherent to the professional rationality is to serve the client by providing those services necessary for the individual client's well being. In contrast to the rule bound accuracy ideal permeating bureaucratic rationality, the professional rationality is characterised by judgements that are intuitive in nature, based on appropriateness (Sainsbury, 2008; Mashaw, 1983). According to Freidson, the application of theoretical knowledge on particular cases through discretionary decision making constitute the nature of professional tasks. Although routines to some extent form a part of professional work, professionals "must be prepared to be sensitive to the necessity of altering routine for individual circumstances that require discretionary judgement and action" (Freidson, 2001, p.23).

The mix of professional and bureaucratic elements in activation work have constituted a recurrent issue in the scholarly debate. There is a widespread agreement that activation work comprises a mix of bureaucratic and professional elements. Thereby, as a reflection of the duality of this work, some authors denote activation workers as hybrid bureau-professionals. The mandatory and sanctioning aspects of activation policies are intimately related to administrative and bureaucratic work. Whereas discretionary assessments and diagnosing of clients, the complexity of motivating and changing peoples attitudes and support provision represent professional-like work tasks.

Despite the above mentioned agreement, there is a scholarly debate on whether or not the administrative elements of activation work are compatible with professional work. For example, Hasenfeld (1999) have argued that monitoring and sanctioning of clients are incompatible with and as such displaces professional work. On the other hand, other authors maintain that the professional and bureaucratic aspects of activation work can be reconciled (Sainsbury, 2008; Marston, 2005; Nybom, 2011; Nothdurfter, 2016).

As have been observed, there are cross-national differences in how reconcilable the administrative/bureaucratic and professional aspects of activation are. For example, on the basis of a comparative study of Germany, Sweden and US, Jewell (2007) finds that the administrative elements are more pervasive in the context of American activation work than is the case in the former two countries. Moreover, Swedish and German activation workers enjoy wider discretionary capacities and thereby are more capable of conducting professional work. Thus, it seems like whether or not the bureaucratic elements inherent to activation work

are compatible with professional work depends on the extent of discretionary powers and bureaucratic elements imbedded in the design, structure and conditions of activation work. The scholarly disagreement regarding the compatibility of professional and bureaucratic elements of activation work can as such be attributed to the fact that these scholars' observations are derived from qualitatively different contexts.

Conflicting tasks. Income provision and employability promotion. It has been maintained that welfare-to-work has two inherently incompatible goals, namely that of provision of income support, the determination and monitoring of benefit entitlements on the one hand, and the provision of work related activities on the other in order to promote client employability (Hasenfeld, 2010; Sadeghi & Terum, 2019). These two goals, constituting separate tasks, call for different modes of logics and arguably different skillsets. Whereas, the former goal requires a people processing and bureaucratic technology, the second calls for a people-changing and professional technology (Hasenfeld, 2010).

Conflicting roles. Intimately associated with the conflicting logics and tasks as accounted for above, influential scholars have also argued that there are conflicting roles to occupy in the frontlines at the boundary between citizens and the state. For example, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) distinguish between the two incommensurable roles of citizen agent and state agent, which they argue are both empirically present and normatively legitimate. Whereas the state agent role implies upward loyalty charged with the responsibilities of carrying out government policies, the citizen agents' frame of reference is the client encounters in which their decisions are based upon their judgements of the client and the possibilities for them within the realm of rules. An apparent parallel to this is the distinction between the roles of controller and helper assumed to create substantial tensions in the frontline workers' everyday work (Terum, 2003; Hasenfeld, 2010; Kupka & Osiander, 2017).

As demonstrated above, frontline activation work is a complex terrain with intricate tensions between the various roles, logics, tasks, discretionary decision making imbedded in rules and procedures, in direct contact with citizens. Thereby, the question of frontline competency is equally complex, both to grasp scientifically and indeed to develop for the purpose of practice.

2.3 Perceived competency and dedication

With the recognition that worker outcomes may be conceptualised in a variety of ways, i.e. actual practices (Scott, 1997), attitudes (Kallio, Blomberg & Kroll, 2013), role perceptions (van Berkel & Knies, 2018), client perceptions (Blomberg, Kroll, Kallio & Erola, 2013), burn out (Lloyd, King & Chenoweth, 2002) and work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), it probably goes without saying that it is far beyond the scope of one singular thesis to grasp and explore the full breath of potential outcomes. Therefore, I have narrowed the wide range of potential outcome variables to two particular phenomena, namely *self-perceived competencies* and *dedication to work*. There are two main reasons for this specific selection. First, these two outcome variables are chosen due to their reported potential influence on work performance and in turn service quality (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; DeOnna, 2002; Hansson, 2001). Second, as it is still in its infancy, the literary field of activation work has thus far virtually ignored dedication and perceived competency. Hence, one of my intentions in this particular thesis is to fill this research gap. In the next sections I attempt to provide rather thorough elaborations on the theoretical and empirical literature regarding these phenomena.

2.3.1 Competency

The concept of competency is widely acknowledged as fussy and seemingly in lack of a general consensus regarding its meaning and definition (Eilström & Kock, 2008; Hoffmann, 1999; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). An important distinction in the various understandings of the term is between competency viewed as an attribute of an individual or employee on one hand, and competency considered as the requirements of given tasks or jobs on the other (Eilström & Kock, 2008). In this thesis I use the term competency to refer to the former meaning, that is as an attribute of an employee.

Among the various definitions of the concept of competency, Benner's proposal is particularly simple, straightforward, widely cited and simultaneously serving the purposes of this thesis. According to Benner, competency is "the ability to perform a task with desirable outcomes" (Benner, 1982, p. 403). Despite the simplicity of this definition, the concept of competency remains complex and thus requires some elaboration of the content. The term ability in this particular definition largely coincides with the term "capacity", which according to Eilström and Kock (2008) consists of perceptual motor skills, cognitive factors (knowledge and intellectual skills), affective factors (attitudes, values and motivations), personality factors (self-efficacy and self-knowledge) and social skills (communication and interpersonal skills).

As highlighted here, competency is evidently more than the mere attainment of knowledge and skills, as it also comprises other factors such as motivation and attitudes.

Due to the complexity of the competency concept, measurement and assessment issues have attracted considerable scholarly attention, including the validity of self-reported knowledge, skills and competencies. Indeed, competency can be measured in a variety of ways, including supervisor assessments, peer assessments, user assessments etc. (Davis, Mazmanian, Fordis, Harrison, Thorpe & Perrier, 2006). Nonetheless, self-ratings are widely used in competency assessment research (Lowman & Williams, 1987; Davis et al, 2006). In order to determine the validity of self-reports scholars have compared self-assessed competency with external or objective measures of competency. However, as the findings of these studies are rather inconclusive, there is still a lack of solid knowledge regarding this topic. For example, while Ackerman et al (2002) and Braun, Sheikh and Hannover (2011), demonstrated that people have generally accurate views of their competencies, other scholars have found that individuals ability to self-assessments are limited (Davis et al, 2006).

Hence, the important question; what do we really measure by asking respondents to rate their own competency still remains relatively unanswered. My proposal in this thesis is that, in the absence of a well-founded and conclusive knowledge base on the relationship between self-assessments and objective assessments, it might be purposive to regard self-reported competency as an aspect of, and intimately related to the concept of self-efficacy. Representing his magnum opus, Albert Bandura coined the social psychological construct *self-efficacy* in 1977. The term refers to people's "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1977, p. 3). An extensive research literature supports the view that self-efficacy is an important determinant of intrinsic motivation, learning motivation, higher self-esteem and work performance (Witzel & Mercer, 2003; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca & Malone, 2006; Judge & Bono, 2001a; 2001b; Judge, Jackson, Shaw, Scott & Rich, 2007; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998; Eraut, 1999).

In the next sections I turn to the concept *activation competency* launched in this thesis and address some central issues in relation to this construct, in its early infancy.

2.3.2 Activation competency

What I call activation competency in this thesis encompasses a complex and multifaceted set of tasks for the frontline workers, including needs assessments regarding both income maintenance and service needs, motivating clients, monitoring clients and sanctioning non-

compliance, deciding what kind of activities and measures are to be required from which clients, and cooperating with employers in the labour market for client placement arrangements. With Benner's general definition of competency as a point of departure, I have defined *activation competency* as *workers ability to (re)integrate various groups of unemployed people into the labour market and to achieve desirable outcomes*.

Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide (2014) have maintained that in inclusive activation settings, based on human capital development, coordinated services within employment and simultaneously social services are required for successful outcomes. In dealing with the new risks of contemporary societies, social services comprise a wide range of services such as social housing, psychosocial counselling, support for the rehabilitation of substance abusers, disability support and indebtedness. In addition, employment services such as education and training, placement and job-search activities are required in order to (re)integrate unemployed persons into the labour market (Heidenreich & Aurich-Beerheide, 2014). An essential prerequisite for the provision and coordination of social and employment services is frontline competencies corresponding to both types of services.

Intimately related to social and employment services, in the specific context of Norwegian activation work, Frøyland and Spjelkavik (2014) have developed a twofold competency framework for what is called activation competency here, consisting of user-oriented competency and market-oriented competency. User-oriented competency corresponding to social services, refers to interpersonal skills, such as communication motivating clients, and the ability to correctly asses user needs. Market-oriented competency revolve around employment services and comprises expertise regarding the local labour market, cooperation skills with employers and knowledge about portfolios of activity measures.

Similar theorising and frameworks regarding competency in activation work can also be traced in other publications (e.g. Baadsgaard, Jørgensen, Nørup, Olesen, 2014; Crawford & Parry, 2010; Hagelund, 2016; Corbiere, Brouwers, Lanctot & van Weegel, 2014). For example, Crawford and Parry's (2010) distinction between "soft" (e.g. interpersonal skills) and "hard" (knowledge of the labour market) competencies among personal advisers in the welfare to work industry reflect some of the same issues as in user-oriented and market-oriented competency. This claim also resonates in scholarly work from Denmark (Nothdurfter & Olesen, 2017). In a similar vein, Hagelund (2016) acknowledges the needs for both user-oriented and market-oriented competencies in activation work. However, her observations

shows that the welfare organisations and frontline workers in Norway pay insufficient attention to labour market expertise.

Also, within supported employment literature, it has been suggested that a twofold competency, that is abilities to establish relationships with employers and support, client-centred approach is required from employment specialists for vocational success (Corbiere, Brouwers, Lanctot & van Weegel, 2014).

In sum, there is relatively wide support for the twofold activation competency model underpinning this thesis.

2.3.3 Dedication to work

Receiving increased research attention over the past 20 years, work engagement is an emerging concept within the school of positive psychology, more specifically positive occupational psychology, representing the scientific study of optimal employee functioning (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris, 2008). Originally pioneered by Kahn (1990), Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker (2002) have offered the definition most widely cited. They define work engagement as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli et al, 2002). As a broad and persistent affective-cognitive state, engaged workers are characterised by being energetic, positively connected to their work and have a feeling of conducting their job effectively (Leiter & Bakker, 2010).

It is well documented that work engagement is a significant predictor of various positive and important employee, team and organisational outcomes (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Attempts have been made to empirically summarise the rich, emerging scientific literature on work engagement and its consequences for individuals and organisations. For instance, in a meta analytic review, Christian and Slaughter (2007) found that work engagement appears to be beneficial for work commitment and health. Further, engaged workers have been found to display better task performance (Christian, Garza & Slaughter, 2011), achieve better financial results (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2009), and perform better team work (Costa et al, 2015). In sum, work engagement is associated with well-being and good performance (Halbesleben, 2010) and thus, there are reasons to believe that it is beneficial both on the individual and organisational level.

The most commonly used operationalisation of work engagement comprises the three components *vigour, dedication* and *absorption*. Vigour refers to high levels of energy, persistence in difficult times and the readiness to invest in one's work. Dedication represents

high work involvement and feelings of significance, pride and enthusiasm. Absorption is characterised by a persistent sense of "flow", deep concentration and engrossment in one's work (Schaufeli et al. 2002). The attention in this study is on dedication. It has been found that the dedication component of work engagement is of special relevance for professional commitment (Halbesleben, 2010) and have been reported to be the strongest predictor of several work outcomes (Adekola, 2011).

2.4 Qualification and socialisation for activation work

Although, as shown above, the debate on the nature of activation work is surrounded by a wide range of disputes, and also differences across national models, some reflections and empirical works may be derived from the literature on the issue on qualifications and socialisations for activation work. Regardless of work context[4], it is usually assumed that qualification and socialisation for å given occupation occurs in roughly two main domains, the educational site and the work site[5] (Eraut, 2004). Accordingly, underpinning this thesis is the premise that both of these domains have potentially qualifying and socialising effects on for instance worker attitudes, competencies, dedication and behaviour. In the following sections, I provide accounts for both of these arenas.

2.4.1 Educational qualification and socialisation

Originating from Adam Smith's "The wealth of nations" (1776), the *human capital* framework views higher education as a central part of the qualifying and socialising processes individuals need in order to perform tasks adequately and efficiently in a given occupational or professional setting (Schultz, 1977; Tight, 2002; Becker, 1964). Based on rather inconclusive empirical foundations (Mayhew, 1972; Wolf, 2002), the human capital perspective postulates that higher education have essential qualifying and socialising impact on peoples abilities to perform tasks and contribute to value production in future work sites. Thus, the question is not if, but rather, what kinds of knowledge and preparing for work life higher education imparts.

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[4] Clearly, this statement will not be valid for occupations without requirements of higher education.
[5] It should be kept in mind though that educational qualification does not always occur prior to workplace qualification. For example, the increasing use of continuing education illustrates that these two qualification settings do not necessarily occur in a certain chronological order.

The last decades have witnessed an unprecedented worldwide expansion of the higher educational system (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2019). Analogue to the human capital perspective, this "massification" of higher education stems from an idea that the technical developments, division of labour and in effect the complexities of tasks in work life require more abstract knowledge presumably acquired through higher education (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Altbach et al., 2019). Implied in this idea is that worksites are unable to provide all the learnings required. Societies' economic success in the 21st century is commonly attributed to higher education (Goh & Lee, 2008). In addition to the assumption that higher education serves as qualification for work life, it has been argued that it also creates active citizens and hence promotes democracy and social equality (Altbach et al., 2019; Antikainen, 2006). Accordingly, an important distinction utilised in this thesis is between those who have completed a post-secondary (higher education) training and those who have not.

The increased division of labour has resulted in a substantial differentiation within higher education (Huisman, 2009; Reimer & Jacob, 2011) argued to be a necessary prerequisite for the allocation of individuals with the appropriate characteristics and competencies end up in the right positions (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). A wide range of study fields in the post-secondary educational systems have thus been established in order to ensure the aforementioned purpose. The rapid changes of expansion and differentiation seems to be driven by the notion that society needs higher skilled labour and more differentiated labour.

In the Nordic countries, the rise of the welfare state in the "golden age" coincides with the massification of post-secondary education in general and professional education in particular (Antikainen, 2006). The rationale was that mass education produces qualifications in individuals needed to implement the various policies of the welfare state. In effect, strong ties between the state and the professions were established, which is the case for social workers in Norway.

Scholars have attempted to examine how higher education affects students (e.g. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some of the findings in these studies indicate that higher education increases students' factual knowledge, verbal and quantitative competence, cognitive and intellectual skills, and brings about broad changes in values and attitudes. Furthermore, higher education stimulates critical thinking for example in relation to distinctions between true and false claims (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although it seems undisputable that higher education imparts intellectually desirable changes in students, it is less clear whether these changes actually qualify students for a given occupation or work task.

Indeed, some studies have demonstrated a gap between the competencies needed to perform a given job and the knowledge and skills acquired through higher education (Smeby & Vågan, 2008; Tynjälä, 2008), and as such questioning the value of higher education for the purpose of qualifying for work life.

A common distinction in higher education is that of liberal and professional fields of studies (Smeby, 2008; Grimen, 2008; Parsons & Platt, 1973). Although these educations have a common purpose of qualifying for work life, several differences can be identified. Whereas the liberal fields of studies (e.g. mathematics, physics, social sciences, philosophy, educational sciences etc.) are based on a cognitive demarcation, the professional fields (e.g. teachers, nurses, social workers etc.) are delimitated on the basis of relevance for professional practice (Smeby, 2008). The knowledge base in liberal educations are homogenous as all the knowledge elements are derived from the same scientific discipline. In contrast, the knowledge base in professional education is heterogeneous in that it combines knowledge from several academic disciplines. Furthermore, as opposed to the liberal fields of studies being autotelic (having a purpose in itself), professional education can be regarded as heterotelic, meaning that they have an extraneous end and hence exist for purposes apart from itself (Grimen, 2008). Professional education thus aims to qualify workers for interventions and problem solving in the real world. The assumption then is that there are strong links between professional education and tasks in the work life.

Related to the human capital perspective, Eraut (2004) distinguishes between five types of knowledge potentially acquired in professional educational contexts. The first type of knowledge deals with theoretical knowledge in terms of introduction of concepts and theories. It is assumed that these concepts and theories might help students understand, explain and critique the practices of a given profession or occupation, and further, arguments used to justify them. Moreover, the theories have the potential to give rise to new thinking about the role of the profession and proposals of new forms of practice. The second type of knowledge Eraut refers to deals with methodology, concerning how knowledge is produced in academic as well as occupational contexts. Acquiring practical skills and techniques is the third type of knowledge in Erauts typology. This is typically acquired through skills workshops, laboratory work and project work. Further, Eraut emphasizes another type of skills, namely what he calls generic skills. This is referred to as a side effect of academic work and involves writing, information technology, self-management, modes of interpersonal communications etc. The last type of knowledge included in Eraut's typology is what he calls the general knowledge about the occupation, in terms of its structure, modes of working and cultural values.

Common for human capital perspectives is the interpretation of higher education as an important arena for qualification and socialisation for labour supply. The *signalling-hypothesis*, as an alternative perspective on education views education mainly as a filter or selection system, allocating individuals certain positions (Collins, 1979; Stiglitz, 1975; Arrow, 1973). From this perspective, rather than qualifying and socialising, higher education has thus a symbolic function. Nevertheless, educated individuals might still be regarded as more desirable from an employer perspective due to the proven ability to manage the higher education system and complete a programme, implying characteristics such as endurance, motivation, dedication and discipline (Brennan, et al., 1996).

The links between work and education, even professional education are disputed. Recent research have provided indicative support for the signalling-hypothesis. As mentioned above, some studies have demonstrated the missing link to connect higher education with practice fields (Scheeler, 2008; Werquin, 2012; Hatlevik, 2012). Newly employed individuals often experience a gap between the theoretical and generic knowledge acquired in higher education settings and requirements in the practice field.

Thus, although some indications can be derived from previous studies, questioning the effects and relevance of higher education is nonetheless highly problematic because most workplaces have specific educational requirements and thus homogeneity among workers. For example, employment in teacher positions in Norway requires a specific type of educational background, namely teacher training (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2016). Thus, assessing the effects of teacher training by comparing trained versus non-trained or otherwise educated employees is not feasible. In contrast, given the heterogeneity of educational backgrounds represented in an activation work context makes it possible to evaluate the influence of both length and various types of training.

2.4.2 Educational backgrounds of activation frontline workers

Given the considerable variations in activation work design, providing a universal account of qualification needs for these different work settings is not an easy task. My intent in the following sections is to provide an overview of the scholarly international literature regarding the occupational context in frontline activation work. This field of literature is still in its infancy and a wide range of questions are still to be addressed. However, some important issues bearing relevance for this thesis have been observed, debated and empirically explored. Among these are the following: the educational backgrounds of activation workers, the

compatibility of social work and activation work and the impacts of educational background. In the following sections, I will address the literature of these three issues in turn.

According to van Berkel and van der Aa (2012), the educational background (level and type) of activation frontline workers vary considerably between nations and between organisations within nations. Thus, shared skills, expertise, standards and values constituting a professional community is lacking in welfare offices throughout most OECD countries. For example, in the Netherlands, at least three types of educational backgrounds have been identified, namely social administration, personnel and labour and social work (van Berkel, 2017). In the UK, social workers have never played a central part in Jobcentre Plus. Rather, the recruitment and training strategy have relied heavily on civil servants without formal, accredited qualifications, receiving workplace training in the organisation (Sainsbury, 2017). Likewise, Austrian frontline workers do not have special professional backgrounds, but receive specialised workplace training (Nothdurfter, 2017). Thus, relying on workplace learning in activation work contexts is not unusual. With the exception of Poland, where almost all frontline workers are trained social workers (Kazmierczak & Rymsza, 2017), the Scandinavian countries have traditionally relied most strongly on social workers to carry out activation work. However, recent years have witnessed tendencies towards declining numbers of social workers in welfare offices both in Denmark (Caswell & Larsen, 2017) and Norway (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019). Thus, in an international perspective, discussing the occupational context of activation work is complex due to the considerable educational variations between nations. As van Berkel put it: "…there is no such thing as the welfare-to-work occupation: workers deliver various types of policies to various groups of clients; they have various roles, responsibilities and tasks in various governance settings…".

2.4.3 Social work

According to International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) social work is defined as follows:

> *"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels."*

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This definition implies that social work is a practice, based on some core values and competencies, as well as a type of higher education qualifying for certain work tasks. There is an intimate relationship between social work as a set of values, practices and type of education. Indeed, the purpose of social work education is arguably to impart knowledge, skills, competencies and values imbedded in social work ideology and as such enable social work practice (Edwards et al., 2006).

The focus in this thesis is whether the values and competencies underpinning social work are compatible with activation work, and furthermore whether individual social workers, as a result of the socialisation and qualification processes they have been exposed to through their social work education, differ from other workers in the context of activation work. These two focus areas operate on different levels of abstraction. Whereas the former is concerned with the compatibility between two value sets, the latter refers to differences on the individual level. In order to enable analysis of the relationship between social work and activation work, the next sections are dedicated to elaborations on core purposes, values, competencies and approaches central to social work practice and education.

Although there are differences between countries in the specificities of educational programmes of social work, some common features, being my concern in the next sections, may be identified. In classical theory of the professions, whereas doctors and lawyers are described as full-fledged professions, social workers are denoted as a semi-profession (Etzioni, 1969). Within this perspective, it is commonly assumed that a research-based knowledge base, autonomy, and monopoly on knowledge and professional practice are among the criteria that social work lack in order to obtain full-fledged professional status.

More recent theorising in the sociology of professions render the concept of semi-professions somewhat obsolete. Thus, other concepts seeking to understand the mutual implications between organisations and professions have been developing at the intersection between the sociology of organisations and the sociology of professions. For example, representing a challenge to Freidson's (2001) accounts of professions as a third logic, Evetts (2003) introduced the concept of organisational professionalism seeking to describe the shift from notions of "partnership, collegiality, discretion and trust to increasing levels of managerialism, bureaucracy, standardisation, assessment and performance review" (Evetts, 2011, p. 407). It has been argued that social work should be understood within the realms of organisational professionalism (Caria & Pereira, 2016).

Regardless of the different research traditions and analysis of professions and professionalism, one of the problems facing social work in a professionalisation perspective are the difficulties of articulating and demarcating an exclusive knowledge base (Eraut, 1994; Taylor & White, 2006). However, some consensus regarding core knowledge and competence areas exist. There is a common agreement for instance that social work, like other professional educations, is based on borrowed theories derived from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, social policy, psychology, economics, anthropology and philosophy.

In an effort to revisit the knowledge base of social work, Trevithick (2008) proposes a threefold knowledge framework. She argues that social work knowledge base consists of theoretical, factual and practical types of knowledge. Moreover, she underlines that these three kinds of knowledge overlap and interweave. The first kind of knowledge refers to theories that illuminate understandings of people, situations and events, theories regarding the role and purpose of social work and theories about direct practice. Factual knowledge is related to legislation, social policy, agency policy, information relating to specific groups of people and information regarding specific personal and social problems (Trevithick, 2008).

Social work is considered one of the most value-based professional educations (Reamer, 2013), deeply rooted in a fundamental set of values that shape the practitioners' priorities and professional identities (Terum & Heggen, 2016). It has been emphasised that the "competences in social work practice requires the understanding and integration of the values of social work" (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 1991, p. 15). Social work is fundamentally based on values such as solidarity and social justice (Kokkin, 2005), both internationally (IFSW, 2018) as well as in the Norwegian context (FO, 2020). Consequently, the purpose of social work is to promote social inclusion, empowerment, community and human rights, and to counteract marginalization, poverty and social inequality (Levin, 2004). Considered as one of the pioneers of social work, Mary Richmond (1917), denoted social work as "doing good".

From a social work perspective, social problems at the individual level have structural explanations and therefore cannot be solved solely at the individual level (Røysum, 2013). A holistic approach to the individual's problems has been emphasized as central to the social profession, in which the intention is to work with the client's individual and social situation, which lays the foundation for the characteristic expression "the person-in-environment" (Richmond, 1917). With inspiration from the pioneers Richmond (1917) and Addams (1994), the social worker should be individually and relationally oriented. In this way, the helper-client relationship is of crucial importance for social professional practice (Hasenfeld, 2010;

Kollbotn, 2006). Hence, the relationship between social worker and client lies at the core of the performative aspect (Molander and Terum, 2008) of social work, where contact and trust are central enterprises that in turn lay the foundation for people changing technologies, which places great demands on the breadth of analysis in social workers' knowledge. A long-term perspective is emphasized as it often takes time to build trusting relationships with clients. These factors in total require a relatively autonomous professional role with wide discretionary powers so that the social worker can apply the wide range of measures and working methods carefully tailored to the needs of particular individuals.

The overall purpose of the people changing technologies work in social work can be understood as defying social exclusion and hence promoting social inclusion (Scherr, 1999). Such a goal largely coincides with the concept of broad activation, where inclusion is widely understood (Sabatinelli, 2010). In this perspective, work is seen as one of several potential inclusion areas, and empowerment is emphasized as important for change work (Øverbye, 2000). This contrasts with the concept of narrow activation, where the goal is almost exclusively the fastest possible inclusion of work through the use of disciplinary measures (Sabatinelli, 2010).

Several authors have underlined that social work has always been in a state of ambiguity and tensions (Postle, 2002; Clarke, 1993; Nothdurfter, 2016). The social work profession has had to deal with difficulties and dilemmas inherent in exercising both care and control in a mediating role between the state and clients. One of these tensions pertains the ostensible conflicting concepts of paternalism and empowerment (Bransford, 2011). By tracing the evolution of the two distinct helping paradigms of the diagnostic (paternalistic) and strengths-based (empowerment) approaches in the history of social work, Bransford (2011) proposes that an integrated framework is both feasible and desirable.

With regard to cross-national similarities and differences in the understandings and orientations of social work, there has been scholarly attempts to comparatively analyse these distinctions (Meeuwisse, 2009; Weiss, 2005). For example, in a comparative study of social work students in several countries, Weiss (2005) mainly found similarities between the students in professional ideology regarding the goals of the profession and causes of poverty. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an exhaustive account of these various perspectives on comparisons. However, some issues and major distinctions between national models, highly relevant for the purposes of this thesis, are worth mentioning.

As part of the Scandinavian or Nordic model, both local (municipalities) and central authorities have had a dominant organising position in provision of social and welfare

services, with a large proportion of social workers delivering these services. This institutional component differs sharply from that of other Western national models, such as the US and Germany (Millar & Austin, 2006; Meeuwisse, 2009; Lorenz, 1994) and have several potential implications. Thus, Evetts' concept of organisational professional, as presented above, is a rather apt term for the Norwegian social work profession.

First, due to the employment relationship (social workers as employees in the public sector), and thereby implementers of the law, social workers acquire a more complex role in which they operate as both helpers (citizen agents) and controllers (state agents) (Terum, 2003; Lødemel, 2019). In turn, this dual role have implications for the range of expertise requirements. In addition to requirements of competency in relation to people changing technologies (methodical/professional work), social workers in Norway are also expected to in-depth knowledge and skills related to law enforcement. Finally, the tight links between social workers and authorities in the Scandinavian countries have also led to concerns about social workers readiness to repressive interventions (Meeuwisse, 2009).

2.4.4 The compatibility between activation work and professional social work

The compatibility between the social work profession and activation work has been a recurrent issue in the literature the last couple of decades. Roughly speaking, two perspectives may be identified in this literature; one the one hand, those who assume a rather critical stance on the compatibility issue (Hasenfeld, 1999; 2010; Wright, 2003; Lorenz, 2001; Thoren, 2008; Handler, 2014), and on the other, those who maintain that despite some challenges, these concepts could be reconciled (Nothdurfter, 2016; McDonald & Marston, 2008; Marston, 2005; Hansen & Natland, 2017; Kjørstad, 2005).

Representing the most prominent voice for the incompatibility perspective, Hasenfeld has argued that "a social service orientation cannot flourish when embedded in a mandatory program" (1999, p. 193). Accounting for social service orientation as embedded in social work values, Hasenfeld outlines its core elements as; "(a) a belief system that ascribes high moral worth to the clients; (b) a service technology that is individualized, tailoring the services to the specific needs and attributes of the clients; and (c) staff-client relations that are based on mutual trust" (1999, p. 185). The focal point of concern in Hasenfeld's reasoning is that activation policies as a policy setting corrupts the social service orientation in several ways. First and foremost, it is the mandatory and coercive features of activation policies, relying on monitoring and sanctioning regimes, that make up for the inherent incompatibility between the two latter concepts. Representing the very imperative for people changing

technologies, trusting relationships between worker and client run the risk of being thwarted by staff behaviours such as monitoring, sanctioning or threats of sanctioning. Moreover, Hasenfeld asserts that in contrast to a social service orientation, the underlying premises in activation policies ascribes low moral worth to the clients. Welfare clients are assumed to lack proper moral values and work ethics and therefore held responsible for their predicament (Hasenfeld, 1999; 2010;).

In addition to the ideological and ethical contradictions between the social work profession and activation policies, several scholars have highlighted the threats these policies pose for the notion of professionalism (Hasenfeld, 1999; 2010; Caswell & Larsen, 2017; Jørgensen, Nørup & Baadsgaard, 2010). These threatening mechanisms are predominantly related to the governance and organisational context, wherein a wide range of NPM techniques such as marketization of services, curtailment of frontline discretionary powers, promotion of bureaucratic rationality at the expense of professional treatment, and ever more standardisation and simplification of complex work tasks constitute salient features of activation work (van Berkel, van der Aa & van Gestel, 2010; Kjørstad, 2005; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Brodkin, 2007). For example, according to Sjefstad (2013) performance management and efficiency measures in the Norwegian NAV have put pressure on social workers to realise quick results and a an over-attendance on job placements. Furthermore, she argues that workers' administrative and bureaucratic tasks in NAV are too time consuming and come at the expense of time which should be used on interaction with clients.

Although there are not many explicit disagreements between most scholars on the claims made by Hasenfeld, some observers display more positive prospects on behalf of the social work profession in the context of activation work. For example, although recognising the potential conflict between social work ideals and activation policies, Nothdurfter (2016), by relying on Lorenz' (2005) analysis, makes an interesting case for how social work nonetheless could be reconciled with and thus serve as a referential model for activation work. In his assertion of the possibilities of a reconciliation between social work professionalism and activation policies, he emphasises social work's ability to negotiate tensions and ambiguities in social policy contexts, which constitutes "the political nature and the citizenship dimension of social work" (Nothdurfter, 2016: p. 426).

Similar arguments regarding social work's ability to deal with difficult struggles with the notion of professionalism have also been made by other scholars in relation to both activation work as well as other work contexts (Hansen & Natland, 2017; Banks, 2013; Lorenz, 2001; Kjørstad, 2005). Moreover, in an effort to nuance the compatibility question,

Caswell and Larsen (2017) argue that in theory, the social work tradition emphasising responsive individual solutions fits well with the active approach imbedded in activation work. It is however the social disciplining elements (e.g. sanctions) of activation that contradicts social work values.

On the basis of an empirical study undertaken in a Norwegian activation context, Hansen and Natland (2017) argue that compromising social work ideals is not unavoidable. Rather, they identify social workers' often pragmatic approach to clients, safeguarding organisational and bureaucratic claims of coercion and simultaneously maintaining purposive client relations and acknowledging the complexity of social work practices. The compatibility issue raised in this section might potentially influence workers' attitudes, competencies and dedication to their work, which are addressed in the papers underpinning this thesis.

2.4.5 Consequences of educational background

Apart from theoretical deliberations on the relationship between professional social work and activation policies, some empirical work have been done to examine whether social workers in the practice field of social policy (i.e. welfare offices) deviate from other workers in matters related to activation policies, i.e. their practices, view on poverty, unemployment and activation policies.

Already in 1997, Scott documented some minor differences in discretionary decision making between social workers and their colleagues. In an experimental analogue undertaken in Chicago, USA, it was found that social workers were somewhat more generous than their co-workers in benefit provision for clients (Scott, 1997: p.48). However, as emphasised in this paper, the effect of professional field on award was not as powerful as organisational and client-related factors.

Social workers different take on clients has also been demonstrated in the study context of Australian employment services where it was found that social workers to a greater extent than co-workers endorsed a strengths-based approach to client interventions, designed to promote self-efficacy (McDonald & Marston, 2008). On these grounds, the authors argue that in order to improve employment services, social workers and their knowledge and skills should inform policy and practices. Relatedly, they suggest that the Scandinavian model in which social workers have been granted a relatively large professional and discretionary room for decision making should be the reference model for Australian employment services. In a similar vein, Jewell (2007) have in a previous article emphasised Sweden, a Scandinavian country with a substantial proportion of social workers charged to implement social assistance

schemes and consequently "social work ethos" governed welfare offices, as an epitome model for other countries to strive for. These proposals are highlighted on the basis of comparative street-level case studies of Germany, USA and Sweden.

Also, more recent studies have explored potential differences between social workers and colleagues in matters such as attitudes, perceptions and approaches related to clients and otherwise activation policies and practices. For example, in a Dutch study, by employing Maynard-Moody and Musheno's distinction between state agent and citizen agent (2000), van Berkel and Knies (2018) reported that social workers, in accordance with the ideology underpinning the "social work ethos", differed from co-workers in their preference to adopt a citizen agent role. This role reflects street-level workers "who to serve" dilemma and implies that the workers loyalty is primarily oriented towards clients and their needs, as opposed to state agents who place stronger emphasis on rules and policy objectives rather than clients.

In another study, social workers were found to be more inclined to support a "social blame" explanation of poverty than colleagues who more often supported "individual blame" explanations (Blomberg, Kroll, Kallio, Erola, 2013). Moreover, to the authors' surprise, the results of this study demonstrated substantial variation across the Nordic countries wherein the study was undertaken. In particular, Norwegian and Swedish social workers stood out as the ones with the strongest emphasis on social/structural explanations of poverty.

Yet another study of worker attitudes in the Nordic countries revealed differences between social workers and workers without a degree in social work (Kallio, Blomberg & Kroll, 2013). In this study of attitudes towards the unemployed, social workers to a lesser degree than colleagues endorsed individualistic attitudes, meaning that worklesnes is regarded as a choice and hence the responsibility for unemployment places on the individual herself. Furthermore, it was reported that the social workers in this study did not perceive benefit misuse among unemployed people as a major problem (Kallio, blomberg & Kroll, 2013). Similarly, based on a deservingness theory framework, Kallio and Kuovo (2015) found that social workers and deacons displayed a less critical stance on the deservingness of social assistance beneficiaries than other workers usually lacking a social science educational degree. In explaining these findings, the authors place a strong emphasis on the formational effects of educational socialisation on peoples social perceptions (Kallio & Kuovo, 2015).

In the Norwegian context, Terum, Tufte and Jessen (2012) have found that among frontline workers in the NAV offices, social workers, in comparison to co-workers, take a somewhat more critical stance towards conditional support towards the unemployed. Taken together, the studies reviewed above suggest that there are some, however usually rather small

differences between social workers and other workers, suggesting that with regards to policy implementation, it might matter what kind of educational background the workers have. Accordingly, van Berkel (2019) raises the question of whether it could be useful to distinguish a certain social work perspective on activation policies. Nevertheless, the rather weak relationships between professional field and outcomes reported in the studies reviewed here, raise the important question of exactly how powerful educational background is as a determinant of various worker outcomes? In other words, how much does it really matter for frontline practices to recruit a social worker instead of candidates with other educational backgrounds? Are there perhaps other obvious factors influencing worker outcomes in a more substantial extent?

Taken together, the theoretical considerations and empirical studies reviewed above suggest, albeit inconclusively, that educational background of workers might have an influence on perceptions, attitudes, competencies, dedication and in turn practices in the field of activation work. Constituting some of the knowledge gaps I attempt to fill in the thesis at hand, there is a lack of studies directly exploring the relationships between educational backgrounds and competencies and dedication in the specific context of activation work. However, a few studies both directly and indirectly examining these relationships in other work context may be identified. In the next sections I will provide a review of these empirical works.

2.5 Workplace qualification and socialisation

There is a common agreement that education is only one part of the qualification process and that important further qualification and socialisation occurs in the workplace (Eraut, 2010; Heggen, 2008; Caspersen, Havnes & Smeby, 2017; Gerber, 1998; Felstead, Fuller, Unwin, Ashton, Butler & Lee, 2005; Smeby & Mausethagen, 2011). In fact, the workplace environment can indeed provide rich opportunities for learning and development (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). In a continually changing society and work life, new tasks, technology and procedures require a constant effort towards learning in modern workplaces (Caspersen, Havnes & Smeby, 2017). As such, the workplace is of paramount importance regarding organisational facilitations for learning, motivation, dedication, job satisfaction and in turn service quality. In the context of activation work, there is surprisingly rather sparse research literature in relation to the workplace and organisation as a learning arena. In an attempt to fill

this gap in this thesis, I have explored workplace learning in an activation work context. More specifically, I examine the associations between various learning patterns and workers perceived competency. In addition, with the Job Demand Control Support model [6](JDCS) as a point of departure, I examine the associations between workplace psychosocial factors and dedication to work. Due to the lack of studies of JDCS in the activation work context, the following sections will provide a review of some of the literature in these regards in other organisational contexts.

2.5.1 Workplace learning

Originally pioneered by Marsick and Watkins (1990), the concept of workplace learning have gained increased scholarly attention since the beginnings of the 1990's (Tynjälä, 2008). Prior to this period, a common assumption was that employees acquire their training before they enter the workplace (Gerber, 1998). However, these scholarly works have mainly had a focus on the private sector, and have virtually ignored the public sector [7](Rashman, Withers & Hartley, 2009), especially in relation to human service organisations. As NAV represents one of the largest human service organisations in Norway, this thesis with workplace learning as one of the main topics of inquiry aims at contributing to this field of literature.

Workplace learning can be defined as "the process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet current and future work requirements" (Jacobs & Park, 2009, p. 134). The general scholarly literature on workplace learning have addressed issues such as the nature of workplace learning; different levels of workplace learning, ranging from individual to region; organisational support for workplace learning; and types of workplace learning such as formal and informal (Tynjälä, 2008). It is mainly the latter two that is of particular relevance in the thesis at hand.

As workplace learning often refer to "the multiple ways through which employees learn in organisations" (Jacobs and Park, 2009, p.134), the question of how workers learn on the workplace has represented a recurrent issue in the literature. The distinction between formal and informal workplace learning have become a widely applied categorisation (Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro & Morciano, 2015; Jacobs and Park, 2009). Formal learning is defined as structured and planned learning intended to provide employees with

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[6] See pages 43-44 for an account of this model.
[7] See page 42 for elaborations on the differences between private and public sector with regards to workplace learning.

specific areas of knowledge and skills, rather similar to traditional classroom instruction (Manuti et al., 2015). According to Eraut (2000, p. 114), formal learning is characterised by (a) a prescribed learning framework; (b) an organised learning event or package; (c) the presence of a designated teacher or trainer; (d) the award of a qualification or credit; and (e) the external specification of outcomes. Evidently, formal learning corresponds well with the "standard paradigm" of learning as conceptualised by Becket and Hager (2002), referring to traditional educational pedagogical frameworks.

Informal learning on the other hand, is most often "defined in relation to what is not formal" (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2002, p.5). It corresponds to the "emerging paradigm" (Hager & Beckett, 2002) and is learning resulting from daily work activities. Thus, this kind of learning is typically unplanned/unintentional and experiential by nature (Lohman, 2005).

At the intersection between formal and informal learning lies the so-called non-formal learning, referring to organised educational activities outside the school system (Schugurensky, 2000). This type of learning usually involves a dedicated teacher/instructor/facilitator designated to teach according to pre-defined learning outcomes. However, non-formal learning rarely leads to officially recognised credits, degrees or diplomas (Colardyn & Bjørnåvold, 2004).

Although some authors use the terms informal and non-formal learning interchangeably (Malcolm, Hodkinson & Colley, 2003), I argue that there are arguably qualitative differences between them legitimising the division between them. Whereas informal learning can appear as a learning pattern characterised by arbitrariness in terms of the intended learning outcomes and the trainers skills and pedagogical qualifications, non-formal learning patterns on the other hand is a more structured and systematised form of learning based on predefined learning outcomes instructed by quality assured trainers. Thus, in this thesis, I operate with this threefold typology of formal, informal and non-formal learning, each of which contains different learning patterns.

2.5.2 Research literature on workplace learning

As research on workplace learning have had a strong theoretical orientation, relatively few empirical studies on the topic exist. In addition, the sparse empirical literature has been concentrated on contextual inhibitors and facilitators of learning in the workplace (Ellinger 2005; Lohman 2005; Sambrook 2005). Thus, research exploring the outcomes of various types of workplace learning, be it formal, informal or non-formal is rather rare (Noe, Tews &

Marand, 2013; Park & Choi, 2016). Moreover, the few existing studies related to the aforementioned issue is primarily undertaken in the private sector, leaving a knowledge gap in relation to the public sector.

The differences between these two sectors warrant context specific scrutiny. For instance, in comparison to the private sector, employees in public human service organisations are often allowed a higher degree of discretionary decision making in increasingly stressful and politicised working environments (Clarke, 2002). Also, workers' learning motivations are assumed to differ in the two sectors. Whereas the need to enhance accountability and production of public values are drivers for learning in the public sector, learning in the private sector is often motivated by profit-related drivers (Marshall, Smith & Buxton, 2009). In the following I attempt to provide an overview of the few studies on the associations between formal and informal and job outcomes, such as performance.

In line with the theoretical perspective that both learning types are needed in worksites (Svensson, Eilström & Åberg, 2004), several researchers have found that both formal and informal learning types are associated with work outcomes (e.g. Jones et al, 2013; Park & Choi, 2016). With respect to comparisons between the positive outcomes of formal and informal learning, some have advocated for the effectiveness of informal learning types due to its inherent flexible nature (Kotey & Folker, 2007). Accordingly, Jones et al, 2013 found that informal learning types were more strongly related to improved business performance. In a similar vein, Park and Choi's (2016) study showed that although both learning approaches were beneficial, informal learning had somewhat stronger impact on job performance. Likewise, in a South Korean study it was found that structured on the job training (S-OJT), representing one type of informal learning, was more influential on learning motivation (Huang & Jao, 2016).

In divergence to the studies mentioned above, other researchers have demonstrated that formal learning is more influential than informal learning. For example, Jayawarna, Macpherson and Wilson's (2007) findings revealed that formal learning more strongly predicted improved job performance. Previous studies also support this finding. In a meta-analysis, it was found that lectures being one kind of formal learning are most positively associated with learning outcomes (Arthur et al, 2003).

As research regarding workplace learning in the public sector is sparse, it is to the best of my knowledge even more scant in direct relation to activation work contexts. There are however a few exceptions. Studies undertaken in NAV have shown the extant usage of informal types of learning in NAV, such as informal guidance (Jessen, 2015; Fossestøl et al,

2014) and team learning (Volckmar-Eeg, 2015). Moreover, Fossestøl et al. (cited in….) found that 80% of the workers reported self-learning as the most important source of learning (Fossestøl et al, 2014 cited in Andreassen, 2019). In contrast, only 20% reported training provided by central management (non-formal learning) as efficient. However, asking people to report the sources of their learning might be biased due to people's lack of learning awareness. Thus, other research design are warranted.

In a cluster-randomised study of skill training (non-formal learning) among qualification programme workers in NAV, Malmberg-Heimonen (2015) revealed that those who had undergone this training program provided better results in terms of part-time employment support for their clients. In a related article published some time later, it was demonstrated that skill training program had a positive effect on workers' self-reported competencies and quality of work (Malmberg-Heimonen, Natland, Tøge & Hansen, 2016). However, none of the studies undertaken in the context of activation work have compared the efficiency of various training types.

2.5.3 Job Demand Control Support Model

Since Karasek (1979) launched the predecessor [8]of the current Job Demand-Control-Support-model (JDCS), it has become one of the most influential job stress models (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The point of departure in this model is that workers' job conditions can be categorised into demands and resources. *Job demands* refer to physical and psychological, as well as quantitative aspects, such as workload and time pressure. Demands are associated with physiological and psychological costs and may therefore turn into job stressors. Typical examples are emotionally demanding interactions with clients, role conflicts and high work pressure. These job demands are not necessarily negative, but they can evoke strain if they exceed the workers adaptive capability (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti & Xanthoupoulou, 2007).

Job resources, on the other hand, relate to "those physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that may (a) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, (b) are functional in achieving goals, and (c) stimulate personal growth, learning and development" (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001, p.501). Although job resources can include a wide range of characteristics, the most

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[8] Karasek launched the Job Demand-Control (JDC) model in 1979. Johnson & Hall (1988) included social support into the model resulting in the current Job Demand-Control-Support model.

frequently applied in research are control and support. Together with demands, these variables form the Job Demand Control Support model (JDCS).

Job control refers to the degree of freedom, independence and discretion in conducting one's work. It is intimately related to autonomy and is subdivided into the two dimensions of skill discretion and decision authority. While skill discretion refers to the workers opportunity to utilise specific skills in the working process, decision authority refers to the employees autonomy in task-related decisions. The third dimension of the JDCS model is social support, which is related to helpful relations with supervisors and colleagues.

Two possibly complementary hypothesis can be identified in the literature on JDCS. The strain hypothesis proposes an increased likelihood of reduced well-being for employees working in high-strain-jobs (high on demands and low on resources). The buffer hypothesis on the other hand focuses on an interaction effect of demands, control and support. It is suggested that social support and control reduce or "buffers" the negative effects of high strain. These two hypothesis are not considered as mutually exclusive, but rather complementary in that the buffer hypothesis is viewed as a particular form of the strain hypothesis (Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel & Schulz-Hardt, 2010).

2.5.4 Antecedents and consequences of work engagement

Numerous studies and meta-analysis have identified job demands (negatively associated) and resources (positively associated) as core predictors of job engagement and as such provided support for both the strain and buffer hypothesis (Prieto, Soria, Martinez & Schaufeli, 2008; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2008; Häusser et al., 2010; Hakanen & Roodt, 2010). For example, in a meta-analysis Christian and Slaughter (2007) found that both demands and resources were associated to engagement with the latter predictor displaying the strongest relation. By reviewing the state of the art, Bakker and Demerouti (2014) have stated that the research on the connections between JD-R model and work engagement have proven to be so solid over the years that the model has matured into a theory.

Work engagement, especially the dimension of dedication have been linked to various work outcomes (Adekola, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; 2008; Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke, 2004; Gierveld & Bakker, 2005 as cited in Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) and as such operates as a mediator between the antecedents and the consequences. For example, in a study of managers and professionals in a university, it was found that dedicated workers were more satisfied with their job, reported lower turn over intentions and higher psychological well-being outcomes (Adekola, 2011). In another study, secretaries high on work engagement

reported higher in-role and extra-role performance (Gierveld & Bakker, 2005 as cited in Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). In yet another study Bakker, Gierveld and van Rijswijk (2006, as cited in Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) found positive links between school principals' engagement and their and work performance. Also findings from more recent studies are in agreement with the above articles. For instance, in a 2019 study, it was revealed that work engagement have indeed positive effects on workers in the sense that it predicts higher organisational commitment and job satisfaction, and lower turn over intentions (Saks, 2019).

The section above demonstrates the robust associations between work engagement and desirable worker outcomes such as well-being and performance. Accordingly, dedication constituting an important dimension of work engagement, is assumed to contribute to well-functioning and adaptable workers in an activation context, which in turn might influence the overall service quality in the frontlines.

As robust as these previous findings on the relationship between job demand, control and support are, they are nonetheless not explored extensively and coherently in the specific context of activation work. However, related to the demand dimension of this theory, some research on the significance of case loads and work loads in activation work exist. The next sections provide an overview of this research both with regards to social work in general and activation work in particular.

2.5.5 Research on workload in activation work

Although detached from the JD-R theory outlined above, issues related to the demand and control dimension have received some research attention within the literature of activation work and relatedly street-level bureaucracy more generally (Lipsky, 1980; 2010; Jewell & Glaser, 2006; van Berkel & Knies, 2016; Nothdurfter, 2017; van Berkel, 2017). In this connection, an important distinction have been made between caseload and workload, with the former referring to the total number of clients a worker have assignments towards and the latter referring to the total amount of responsibilities related to both clients and non-client-related tasks (van Berkel & Knies, 2016; Jewell & Glaser, 2006; Lee, 2009; Lipsky, 2010). However, authors seem to use the concepts of caseload and workload interchangeably, probably due to measuring issues (van Berkel & Knies, 2016).

One of the most salient observations made by Lipsky in his influential work "Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services" (1980; 2010) is that street-level bureaucrats' working condition is characterised by chronically inadequate resources, making up for some of the dilemmas they face in their everyday work. Among other resources

(e.g. lack of personal resources, lack of information, lack of training and experience etc), Lipsky emphasises lack of time at the face of high caseloads. In order to cope with lack of resources, street-level bureaucrats develop various strategies such as creaming, favouritism and client referrals, and as such deteriorating the quality of their services (Lipsky, 2010).

Other scholars have also recognised the impact high caseloads may have on service quality. For example, among other organisational factors influencing frontline work, Jewell and Glaser (2006) identify workload as one key factor. On the basis of a cross-case analysis of fieldwork in California, they maintained that due to chronically high caseloads, workers were unable to perform their tasks adequately and therefore had a negative impact on service quality. This argument have also resonated in other publications (e.g. Jewell, 2007; Nothdurfter, 2017; Kazmierczak & Rymsza, 2017). For instance, van Berkel and Knies (2016) have effectively demonstrated how high caseloads can negatively influence work performance. In their study, it was found that high caseloads were negatively associated with the number of clients that workers managed to support into both voluntarily and ordinary work.

Despite of the valuable contribution the studies reviewed above offer, they are nevertheless unable to provide coherent knowledge on how different work characteristics interact in their influence on workers and their performance. In this thesis, by applying the JD-R model, I am able to analyse how the different dimensions of demands and resources work together in their shaping of workers. For example, although it is beyond doubt that high workloads can have deteriorating effects on workers, it could nevertheless be buffered by supervisor and colleague support provided on the workplace.

3 The Norwegian context

The Norwegian context makes an interesting case to study the occupational context of activation work. First of all, due to the social democratic values embedded in the Norwegian welfare state, it can be argued from an ethical and normative perspective that the Norwegian case constitutes an example to follow. Thus, shedding light on the Norwegian activation work context might potentially make a valuable theoretical, as well as practical contribution. Second, like other Scandinavian countries, social workers make up a considerable proportion of the frontline workers in the Norwegian activation context, making comparisons between educational backgrounds possible. Third, as will be elaborated below, the establishment of one-stop-shops in Norwegian labour and welfare policy can bring about novel dynamics and tensions between roles, competencies and educational groups, and thus making the occupational context of the Norwegian activation work context all the more interesting.

The following sections provide a contextualisation of the studies undertaken in this thesis. In particular, I will account for the history of activation policies in the Norwegian context as well as the NAV-reform and it's implications for the new work roles and related competencies in the frontlines of Norwegian welfare and labour administration. Finally, I address the educational backgrounds of workers in NAV.

3.1 History of Norwegian activation policy

In accordance with Esping-Anderson's (1990) classic theory on welfare state regimes, Norway is typically referred to as a social democratic country located in the top bracket with respect to "welfare statism" with generous and predominantly universal welfare benefits. High employment rates appear as a central value in the Norwegian welfare policies. Thus activation policies, understood in terms of labour market programmes and multilevel measures to integrate most segments of the population in ordinary employment, have deep historical roots in Norway, based on the ideal of the "active society" (Halvorsen & Jensen, 2004). However, the design and structural layout have changed considerably throughout the last decades. For example, in the 60's and 70's, early initiatives directed towards childcare institutions represented a modern measure aimed at stimulating the flows into the labour force. Another measure from the same period of time was the institutionalisation of the relatively high pensionable age, evidently designed to retain senior workers in the work force. Overall, in this late post war era, Norwegian activation policies were predominantly directed

towards regional policies and state funding to various industries which in effect resulted in stable regional labour markets.

As unemployment reached new heights in the 80's, the dilemma between prevention of social exclusion and sufficient incentives to seek employment began to receive increasing attention. Officially, the focus was on retaining workers in the labour market. However, de facto implementation of policy yielded ever more devotion to income maintenance. Entitlement criteria for the already existing unemployment benefit were lowered and simultaneously new schemes were introduced for disability benefits. In effect, receipt of disability benefits increased substantially throughout the 1980's (Molander & Terum, 2019; Terum & Hatland, 2014).

In line with the other Scandinavian countries, the early 1990's marked a discursive turn in Norwegian activation policies (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; Halvorsen & Jensen, 2004; Øverbye & Stjernø, 2012) in which the catch phrase "the work line" (arbeidslinjen) emerged in the political debate of unemployment combat. The rhetoric here was directed towards clients' co-responsibility in the qualification and other efforts for labour market integration. At the same time, extensive efforts were made in order to stimulate individuals to choose paid work instead of social benefits. Central measures in this era have been reduction of benefit durations, stricter eligibility criteria for various benefits and a greater emphasis on geographical and professional mobility for job applications and acceptance (Drøpping, Hvinden & Vik, 1999).

During the 1990's and the 2000's, legislative amendments regarding conditions of conduct (activity requirements) were made for all of the most common temporary benefit schemes (social assistance in 1991; unemployment benefit in 2003 and temporary disability benefit in 2010[9]). In 2017, approximately 10 years after the NAV-reform (see below) the element of conditionality for receipt of social assistance was made stricter for clients under the age of 30 (see article 1, page 5). Thus, in comparison to other OECD countries, Norway is regarded as a late reformer with respect to welfare conditionality.

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[9] The temporary disability benefit scheme was a statutory merger of the three previous schemes medical rehabilitation, work rehabilitation and temporary disability pension. The aim of this new regulation was to increase activation for this group of clients as well as a simpler benefit structure (Gjersøe, 2016).

3.2 The NAV-reform

The NAV-reform (NAV is short for Norges Arbeids og Velferdsforvaltning [Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration]) has been denoted the most extensive welfare reform in the history of the Norwegian welfare state (Christensen & Fimreite, 2010; Røysum, 2013). Rolled out between 2006 and 2008, the reform was a merger of the three large public agencies; the state employment office, social insurance office and elements of the municipal social services into a new entity called NAV. In order to maintain the highly valued principle of local self-government in the history of Norwegian welfare policy, a partnership between the local branch of NAV (employment and social insurance services) and the municipalities (social services) were established (Christensen & Fimreite, 2010). Hence, NAV consists of two departments, namely a municipal department responsible for social assistance, social services (i.e. housing, qualification programme etc.), and a state department responsible for unemployment benefits, temporarily disability benefits, disability pension, single parent benefits etc.[10]

As in several other European countries, the backdrop for the reform was the longstanding criticism of fragmented and poorly coordinated labour and welfare services. Thus, the purpose of the reform resulting in the so-called "one-stop-shop" (Minas, 2014) was to promote coordination, increase efficiency by user-friendly, more holistic services and enhancing activation in order to facilitate the inclusion of more people into the labour market (Gjersøe, 2016).

In the wake of the NAV-reform, new professional roles were established, merging the different cultures, work orientations, work methods and competencies from the previous agencies. Whereas the former municipal social service offices, predominantly staffed by social workers, were based on a tradition of local self-government and thus relatively autonomous professional helping roles, the social insurance offices, staffed by in-house trained rights-oriented employees, were characterised by an organisational culture emphasising hierarchy, bureaucracy and performance management (Helgøy, Kildal & Nilssen, 2011). The guiding role of employees in the former employment services was based on a result oriented and a rather narrow employment oriented approach.

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[10] With the exception of disability pensions, recipients of virtually all other benefits are subject to activity requirements, albeit with somewhat varying legislative underpinnings.

The new common generalist work-role labelled the guidance counsellor role (veilederrollen), intended to be shared by all employees, aimed to contribute to a shared understanding of NAVs mandate to facilitate the clients' transition to employment by comprehensive and seamless client follow-up. The basic competency underpinning the guidance counsellor role was expected to be closely related to the generalist model in social work (Røysum, 2013). However, some scholars have argued that the extensive organisational reform, mediated through various components of standardisation, simplification, work-first approach and heavy work loads have challenged the social work professional role (Røysum, 2013). The characteristics of the newly established counsellor role was a stronger emphasis on individualisation of services and labour market oriented, close user follow-up. As such, the new work role implied a closer link between tasks related to income maintenance and activity requirements. Moreover, individualisation of services requires larger discretionary capacities, at least in comparison to the former social insurance work role.

3.3 Educational backgrounds of frontline workers in Norway

Compared to other nations, Norway and other Scandinavian countries are characterised by high proportions of social workers in the frontlines of local social and welfare agencies (Meeuwisse, 2009). In Norway, social work emerged as a profession in the 60's, approximately simultaneously with the legislative transition from the poor law to the social assistance act and the establishment of social service offices in the municipalities (Lødemel, 2019; Terum, 1996; Terum, 2003). Shortly after these events, in order to increase the number of qualified personnel, central authorities introduced requirements for granting financial aid to the municipalities. In order to be granted aid, the municipalities were required to increase the number of positions in the social security offices and fill the them with trained social workers (Terum, 2003). Hence, by means of pronounced state governance, social workers gained dominance over the social security offices throughout half a century from their establishment to the NAV-reform.

Making up for one of the three merged agencies, the social services department of NAV-offices are still mainly staffed by social workers. It is in this municipal part of NAV that social workers have had a dominant role. However, a recently published report[11] addressing

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[11] This report is based on survey data from NAV-offices gathered in 2011, 2015 and 2018. Several of the questions and items in these surveys are identical. Thus, longitudinal analysis on office level were possible. The 2015 survey in this report is also utilised for the papers in this thesis.

the occupational context in NAV in the post-reform years, suggests that the proportion of social workers in the social services department (the municipal part of NAV) has decreased from 61% in 2011 to 51% in 2018 (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019). The reasons for this decline are currently unknown. Could it be that social workers no longer prefer a position in NAV due to the transformed working environments, or can this trend rather be attributed to altered recruitment strategy in which social workers are no longer perceived as a superior profession for the specific work context in NAV.

Despite the decline of the number of social workers in the social services (municipal) department, the total number (both state and municipal part) remains largely stable at approximately 35%[12] (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019). Thus, we have witnessed an increase in the number of social workers in the state part of NAV, implying a possible convergence between the two departments of NAV with respect to recruitment strategy. In the period of 2011 to 2018 the most considerable change in educational backgrounds of workers is that the number of workers with completed post-secondary education (2011 = 34%; 2018=46%) has increased at the expense of workers without higher education (2011 = 34%; 2018 = 22%). This means that the total number of higher educated workers (social workers and workers with other higher education) has increased in this period from 66% in 2011 to 78% in 2018. This change can be attributed to the expansion in higher education as noted in chapter two in this thesis.

Based on the 2015 survey utilised both in the abovementioned report and the papers in this thesis, workers had the following educational background: social work (35%), health care (7%), social sciences (16%), finance/adm/law (12%), lower education (30).

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[12] According to the 2019-report written by Terum and Sadeghi, the number of social workers in 2011 was 32%, slightly increasing to 35% in 2015, and declining to 32% in 2018.

4 Methodology

The aim in this chapter is to provide an account of the data and methods utilised in this thesis and to review some of the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the study. The empirical data underpinning analysis in paper 1 (qualitative) are rather dissimilar from those utilised in the remaining papers (quantitative). Yet, they are all gathered from the same working context.

One of the strengths of this thesis is the composition of qualitative and quantitative data. Adopting a pragmatic worldview in which pluralistic approaches are applied to derive knowledge regarding a problem (Creswell, 2014), this implies that the different research questions I aimed to examine, have been approached by adequate research methods. For example, whereas conceptualisations and justifications of activation policy are best explored by rich interview data (as shown in article 1), the differences between workers of various educational backgrounds should be investigated by means of large scale quantitative data in order to safeguard issues like representativeness (for example article 2).

This chapter is divided in two parts in which the first addresses methodological issues in relation to papers two, three and four based on quantitative data and the latter part deals with methodological concerns in connection with the first paper based on qualitative data.

4.1 Quantitative data

4.1.1 Design and Sampling

With a cross-sectional design, the quantitative data applied in papers 2,3 and 4 was gathered during spring 2015 as a part of large research project TREfF (Welfare in context. Justice. Efficiency. distribution). All workers, 2747 in total, in 113 NAV-offices in 108 municipalities[13] were sent an electronic questionnaire using LimeSurvey (version 2.06). Non-responders received a reminder two weeks later. The same reminder was repeated three times in total. Five weeks after the questionnaire was sent out, the questionnaire was closed down and so no more responses was possible. After this closure, a total of 1735 workers had participated in the study, resulting in a 63% response rate.

The 2015 survey data this thesis is based upon is part of a series of surveys, involving the same NAV-offices, conducted over a seven-year time span, with data collection in 2011, 2015 and 2018. The procedures for sampling of the NAV-offices was already set in

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[13] Most Norwegian municipalities contain only one NAV-office. However, in the biggest municipalities (in this case Bergen) several NAV-offices are located in the same municipality.

connection with the first survey, namely the 2011-NAV-survey. The cluster-randomised sampling procedure was conducted in two steps. First, a randomised sample of municipalities with less than 100 000 inhabitants in the municipality registry were drawn. Second, a sampling were executed from four of the five biggest Norwegian municipalities; that is Bergen, Trondheim[14], Bærum and Stavanger. Oslo, the capital, was excluded from this sample due to comprehensive reorganizational activities in 2011, resulting in limited research access during this period (Jessen, 2011). This fact might reduce the studies' representativeness. However, we have few indications of considerable demographic or other differences between Oslo and the other big municipalities in Norway. Furthermore, there are even less indications that these few differences may potentially have biased the research results of this thesis.

The 2015 survey data comprising of as many as 1.735 frontline workers is indeed unprecedented when compared to other surveys from other countries. This is due to the unique availability Norwegian researchers have to welfare offices as opposed to researchers in for example UK who are often denied access to frontline workers. In addition, the response rate of the above mentioned survey was 64%, which is rather decent. Moreover, the number of participated respondents make up for approximately 10% of the total population of the Norwegian frontline workers in NAV. Taken together, these characteristics make potential threats like representativeness less precarious.

The cross-sectional design of the quantitative part of the thesis give rise to several methodological issues and is mainly related to classic causality problems. Although an association is found between two or more variables, the direction of cause and effect is challenging to assess (Pearl, 2009). The central question concerns whether the outcome affect the measured exposure or visa versa. Statistical analysis of cross-sectional data cannot contribute to clarification of this directional problem. Rather, it is fundamentally a theoretical issue to be settled by the researcher (Winship & Morgan, 1999). Experimental study designs such as randomised controlled trials, viewed as more adequate for causal inferences could be an alternative here. However, experiments pose serious threats to external validity issues (Campbell, 2017).

Although applied to all three quantitatively based papers, the problem of causality is probably most salient in relation to the thesis' third article in which associations between different learning patterns and perceived competency are explored. Indeed, the most desired

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[14] Trondheim and Bergen (in addition to Oslo) are the only Municipalities containing several NAV-offices.

research topic here would be to investigate the predictive power of each learning pattern on perceived competency. However, because of the cross-sectional design of the study, this was deemed impossible. Instead, unable to address the predictor question, associations between study variables were examined. Nevertheless, it is argued here, that in the absence of extant research literature on these relationships, associative findings may serve as a starting point for generating testable hypothesis. Moreover, from a logical point of view, it seems more plausible that perceived competency should be understood as an "effect" rather than cause of learning patterns. Accordingly, the ultimate objective of workplace learning is acquisition and development of competency (Taris, 2006; Tynjälä, 2008).

Due to the often assumed chronological primacy of educational training and socialisation, problems related to causal inferences are not as exigent in paper 2 and 4. Nevertheless, the assumed impact (or rather, as the findings revealed, absence of such) of educational background on perceived competency and dedication may be questioned from at least two angles. First, there is a concern of selection bias: there might be systematic differences between social workers who have decided to work in NAV as opposed to those who have chosen not to. This bias makes it challenging to isolate the "effects" of a given educational programme.

4.1.2 Measures[15]

The measures utilised in this thesis are all described in detail in papers 2,3 and 4. However, some issues in the intersection between these papers will be addressed here.

Although not applied to all, some of the variables in the papers are internationally validated and have demonstrated robust psychometric properties (e.g. UWES-9 and DCSQ). Indeed, this strengthens the construct validity of the study. However, the majority of the measures (e.g. competency[16]) used in the articles have been developed based on close collaboration with experts in NAV, specifically for the TREfF-project which this thesis is a part of. Hence, they are not previously validated in various samples across time and space (e.g. countries) and as such represents a threat to the study's internal validity. These batteries

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[15] One of the most salient measurement issues in this thesis is the construct validity of the competency scale. This issue has been addressed in detail in both articles 2 and 3. In addition, as this issue is both a methodological and conceptual issue, page 24 in this thesis also elaborates on the problems connected to the competency scale.

[16] The competency scale comprised in the 2015-survey consists of 12 items as described and exhaustively included in paper 3. A shorter version of this battery (6 items) is also included in paper 2. These six items were selected because of their particular relevance to the theoretical concept of activation competency.

have been used due to the lack of available validated measures. For example, attitudes towards conditionality (applied in papers 2 and 4) have been a topic of inquiry in several scholarly works, but an agreed upon and validated measurement does, to the best of my knowledge, not exist.

Despite the measurement problems described above, the scales used in the papers demonstrated adequate internal consistency (measured by means of cronbach's α and mean inter item correlation). Moreover, principal component analysis conducted on the competency scale in paper 2 revealed underlying dimensions in accordance with previous theoretical conceptualisations.

Another measurement shortcoming of this study is that my data do not provide information regarding when the educated workers were graduated. Thus, without differentiation, the survey includes workers who graduated the previous year in addition to those who graduated 20 years ago. This too makes it challenging to assess possible "effects" of educational background. Previous research have shown that seniority matters when comparing social workers (Kallio, Blomberg & Kroll, 2013; Thoren, 2008). Thus, in hindsight, it is easy to argue that a question regarding the specific completion year of respondents' education should be included in the survey. However, the variable age is likely to correlate with year of graduation and this variable is included in all survey based papers.

In addition, the survey question regarding workers' length of experience in NAV is questionable. Respondents were asked to indicate the year they started working in NAV. This question can be interpreted in two ways for workers whose seniority extends beyond the time of implementation of the NAV-reform. Thus, some may have indicated the year they started working in the reformed NAV, while others may have responded the year they started their work in the previous offices before the merger. The item provides correct information for respondents employed in 2008 onwards. The length of experience item has been utilised in the analysis of the third paper of this thesis, but not the other papers. It was assumed that despite it's shortcomings, this item was of particular importance for paper 3 exploring workplace learning patterns and perceived competency. One can argue that articles 2 and 4 would also benefit from including this somewhat suboptimal item. However, as mentioned above, age, assumed to correlate with length of experience has been included in these papers. As such, the issue of length of experience, although representing one of the weaknesses of this thesis, is to some extent safeguarded due to the inclusion of the age variable.

The learning patterns explored in the third paper were assessed by single-item measures. Due to reliability and validity challenges, single item measures are rarely favoured

in research (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), yet widely used. Despite these problems, single-items measures are advantageous in terms of brevity, which is important for the purpose of minimising demands on respondents and increasing the response rate (Dollinger & Malmquist, 2009). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that single-item assessments yield satisfactory reliability when applied to measure less complex matters (ibid., 2009).

The second paper in this thesis investigates differences between social workers and all other workers. This approach can produce biases and distort the results due to the heterogeneity of the "other workers". As shown, this diverse group of workers consist of a wide range of educational backgrounds, differentiated both in terms of length[17] and type of education. Therefore, a more differentiated educational background variable might produce more enlightening results[18]. However, as the primary aim in this paper was to identify any differences between social workers and colleagues regardless of their backgrounds, it is not farfetched to make this binary distinction. Also, as van Berkel and Knies (2018) have pointed out, it is rather common to make this same distinction in other studies as well. Nevertheless, as this binary distinction can be viewed as a methodological shortcoming of this thesis, the 4. paper operate with a more differentiated educational variable (social workers, health care, social sciences, finance/administration/law and lower education). As the results from this paper show (see page 65), educational background display rather unsubstantial associations to dedication, presumably related to perceived competency. Therefore, there are few reasons to assume that a more differentiated educational variable in the second paper of this thesis would yield considerable different findings.

4.1.3 Analysis

Papers 2,3 and 4 in this thesis rely mainly on linear regression analysis. This is one of the most common method of analysis when the purpose is to unravel the relationship between a dependent variable (outcome variable) and one or more independent variables (predictors). As these relationships may be erroneous due to possible third variables, researchers often control for the impact of other variables in regression analysis (Field, 2009). Thus, in the aforementioned papers, several possible confounding variables (e.g. gender and age) are

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[17] The variable educational level is a control variable in paper 2.
[18] I have also tested the level of market competency with a differentiated educational background variable and found that social workers score significantly lower than all other educational groups (health sciences, social sciences, finance/adm/law and lower education). This is the same division utilised in paper 4 in this thesis.

controlled for. Furthermore, by means of regression analysis, article 2 applies a mediation model (Shrout & Bolger, 2002; MacKinnon, Fairchild & Fritz, 2007) in which the effect of educational background on perceived competency is assumed to completely or partially be explained by attitudes towards conditionality. In addition, in article 3, possible interaction effects are explored by means of regression analysis. This model assumes that the relationship between two variables may be altered due to the effect of a third variable (Braumoeller, 2004; Baron & Kenny, 1986). Thus, in paper 3, it is assumed that the association between learning patterns and perceived competency may be different for those who perceive relatively high degrees of support from colleagues and managers.

Alongside description and prediction, causal inferences is a core task of social sciences (Hernán, 2018). Nevertheless, regression analysis using observational data, like the survey data applied in this thesis, cannot ascertain causal relationships without firm theoretical grounding (see below for a critical account of the causal inference attempts in this thesis). In modern causal analysis, propensity score matching has gained increasing acceptance in recent decades and represents an alternative approach to regression as it has some advantages over the latter. Initially pioneered by Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983), propensity score matching is a statistical technique that estimates the effect of a treatment (for instance education and workplace learning patterns in the particular case of this thesis) by accounting for the covariates (for instance age and gender) predicting receipt of the treatment (Caliendo & Kopeinig, 2008). In comparison to regression analysis, propensity score matching is more efficient because less parameters have to be estimated and it provides a better weighting of control variables by applying the counterfactual model (Morgan & Winship, 2015). However, as regression analysis is less susceptible to produce biased estimators when the conditional independence assumption is not fulfilled (Lechner, 2002), the issue of choice of technique is not a straightforward one. Furthermore, as propensity score matching ideally requires larger sample sizes (Quigley, 2003), regression analysis have been chosen for the purposes of this thesis.

4.2 Qualitative data

4.2.1 Sampling

The first article in this thesis is based on focus group interview data (seven focus groups from seven NAV-offices) conducted in September 2017. The seven NAV-offices were strategically selected for the study. This strategy was based upon both office size and previous experience

with conditional cash transfers. We believed relatively sizable offices[19] with substantial experience with conditionality would to a greater extent have developed clear attitudes towards and justifications of their practices of conditionality. Four of the offices were situated in Western Norway (the county of Hordaland) and the remaining three in Eastern Norway (the county of Akershus). Six of the seven offices had previously participated in the 2011 and 2015 survey data and had reported to have practiced conditionality even before the amendment in the Social Services Act was implemented. The last recruited office was selected because of a clear recommendation from the County office (NAV Akershus) due to their extant experience in measures aimed to activate their clients. As we were mainly interested in the managements' attitudes in this study, the 17 individual informants (10 women and 7 men) selected for the focus group interviews were usually head of the NAV-office or head of a department within the office. Most of the informants were employed in the municipal part of the NAV-office. However, some of them reported to perform tasks for both the municipal and state part of NAV. In cases of sick absence (two occasions), frontline workers (with a slight extended managerial responsibility) participated in the focus groups.

4.2.2 Focus group interviews

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was developed with the purpose of elaborating on some of the issues addressed in the 2015-survey. The interview guide comprised a wide range of open-ended questions. These questions were related to their attitudes towards the efficiency and justifications of conditionality, perceived challenges of implementing mandatory activation, their practices around clients failing to comply with the mandatory activity measures, consequences for non-compliance and their interpretation of the statutory exemption clause for activity requirements, i.e. who should be exempted. As the interviews were semi-structured, which is the most common form of qualitative interviews (Kelley, 2010), the interview guide was used mainly for reference and thus we followed up the managers' accounts with further queries.

The interviews were conducted by Lars Inge Terum (co-author of the first paper) and myself. Choice of venue is important in qualitative interviews because various locations have the potential of evoking differential emphasis given to particular issues (Barbour, 2010). We decided to conduct the interviews at the respective NAV-offices because we believed the

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[19] Some of the smallest offices in Norway are located in municipalities with less than 3000 inhabitants (Statistics Norway, 2019). These offices have not many cases covered by the conditionality legislation at all times.

office characteristics (e.g. NAV related posters on the walls) were likely to give rise to more elaborate discussions regarding the our topics of inquiry. We started the interviews with brief information regarding the purpose of the study and the informants were ensured confidentiality. Further, the informants gave their consent for recording of the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours. Our interviewing style was understanding and empathetic (Spradley, 1979).

Focus groups interviews are an efficient way of collecting data and are amenable to a wide range of topics. Therefore, they are widely used by scholars in a variety of research traditions (Freeman, 2006; Barbour, 2010). Normative and politicised topics like the ones addressed in paper 1 might for some people appear sensitive and thus aversive to talk about. For such purposes, some scholars have argued that individual interviews are best suited (Barbour, 2010). However, in comparison to individual interviews, the advantage of focus groups in addressing such topics is that each informant can maintain a greater degree of control in the specific interview situation and choose to discussions and responding in accordance with her/his own comfort zone (ibid.).

Focus groups typically comprise 6-12 participants and is assumed to be the ideal number of members. As one of the strengths of focus group interviews is exploitation of group dynamics in order to stimulate discussion (Freeman, 2006), the relatively few participants in each focus group (two-four) might have constrained us from achieving the full potential of group dynamics. This could imply that individual interviews may have been just as suitable for our purposes. However, the efficiency of focus groups is indeed superior to that of individual interviews. Moreover, the use of pre-existing groups, as our groups were, is not favourable due to the pre-existing dynamics within these groups. The managers we interviewed knew each other well and had worked closely together, typically in formal and informal hierarchical relationships (e.g. unit manager and head of department). These relationships may have influenced the members' contributions during the group discussions. For example, the unit managers' accounts may have established dominant norms and as such influenced head of departments' (subordinate the unit managers in the management hierarchy) statements.

4.2.3 Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed. For this purpose, we engaged a research assistant with extensive experience in transcription of interview data. The next step was to analyse the data in order to provide a systematic recording of the issues and themes

addressed in the interviews (Burnard, 1991). We conducted thematic content analysis which is a widely used type of analysis and promising for rigorous exploration of many issues in social science studies (Duriau, Reger & Dfarrer, 2007). Content analysis can be defined as "any methodological measurement applied to text (or other symbolic materials) for social science purposes" (Shapiro & Markoff, 1997). With the aim of becoming immersed in the data, we read through the transcripts and made notes on general themes. Next, we conducted an open coding in which headings that described the aspects of the content were written down and drosses (issues unrelated to the topic of inquiry) were excluded (Burnard, 1991). Further, we grouped together categories under higher-order headings in order to reduce the number of categories. For example, the following headings were collapsed into one category entitled "health promotion justification":

- Activities are good for ones health
- Activities are health promoting
- Activities have health benefits for the youth

Finally, we worked through the categories and removed repetitious or very similar sub-headings until a final list of categories were produced.

5 Results

5.1 Paper 1

Paper I: Frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of behavioural conditionality

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In the aftermath of a survey revealing that 86% of the frontline managers in 110 NAV-offices endorsed welfare conditionality, the first article[20] in this thesis aims to explore and develop a better understanding of frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of welfare conditionality in the context of the Norwegian labour and welfare administration. Although the managers were not explicitly asked about the fit between social work and activation work, one reading of this article is how the managers' testimonies on their perceptions, attitudes, values and justifications of activation policy correspond with social work ideals and competency repertoire. The premise in this work is that frontline managers interpretation of policies regulates and directs the frameworks of workers discretionary powers and as such contribute to shape the organisational culture. For the purposes of the present thesis, this article represents an approach to contextualise and gain a better understanding of how activation policies are perceived in Norway, shed a light on how activation work is conceptualised and the ways it relates to the values of social work. More specifically, it serves the purpose of providing an insight and indication of the nature of activation work in Norway and whether there is a conflict between social work ethos and the ways activation policies and work is understood in this particular Scandinavian country.

Results from focus group interview analysis revealed that the managers adopted a broad definition of conditionality. This meaning of conditionality is characterised by the ambition of an overall re(integration) of clients into society, illustrated by several managers'

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[20] This paper focuses on managers' perceptions and justifications of welfare conditionality in relation to social assistance clients. The other three papers in this thesis (see below) do not analyse competency and dedication solely in relation to social assistance clients, but rather NAV-workers and their overall competency and dedication regardless of client groups they work with. Thereby, the relationship between the articles may be viewed as inconsistent and incompatible. However, many of the managers' responses documented in the first paper revealed their general attitudes towards conditionality, not only towards social assistance clients, but rather towards all clients subject to these policies. I therefore believe that this first article sheds a general light on frontline managers' perceptions of policy objectives and orientations in relation to activation work irrespective of client groups. This illumination allows me to analyse the relationship between social work repertoire and perceptions of activation work in Norway in general.

testimony on the importance of being active regardless of effects on work inclusion. This specific understanding represents the opposite pole to the narrow definition of conditionality concentrating solely on labour market integration and work-first lines of thinking. The authors of this article argue that this perspective on activation policies, intimately related to holistic approaches to people changing technologies, are well in line with the social service orientation embedded in social work values. Moreover, the client sensitivity and mildness of practical implementation as suggested by the informants also corresponds well with social work repertoire. Paternalistic reasoning turned out to be the most commonly held justification of welfare conditionality in which clients best interest seemed to be the primary concern for the managers interviewed. As noted in the chapter on theoretical perspectives in this thesis, paternalism with its coercive elements and lack of respect for client autonomy represents an area of tension in the social work literature. However, paradoxically, paternalistic justifications seemed to appear in close relation to visions of client empowerment. In other words, managers expressed support towards sanctions and coercion conceptualised as pedagogical tools for helping clients achieve empowerment.

In sum, the findings of this article indicates marginal immediate conflict between social work ethos and the ways activation work is perceived to be carried out. Moreover, the ways activation work seems to be implemented in Norway appear to coincides with social work competency repertoire. However, given social work's ambivalence towards paternalistic approaches and consequently encroachment on client autonomy, some potential lines of conflict may be detected here. Despite this potential divergence, the overall picture of the nature of the Norwegian activation work as portrayed by frontline managers in this particular study indicates that social workers are perhaps the best, or at least a good fit in this organisation. However, the empirical question regarding whether social workers as individual employees actually stand out as particularly well fitted and competent in relation to activation work still remains unanswered. I have attempted to address this important question in articles 2 and 4.

5.2 Paper 2

The second paper seeks to examine competency requirements of activation work as well as assessing whether social workers differ from their co-workers with regard to activation competency. Based on a survey of 1,735 frontline workers in the Norwegian labour and welfare administration, factor analysis revealed the two distinct competency components, market oriented and user-oriented competency. This finding is in clear agreement with the theoretical outlook on the two fold competency as outlined in the theory chapter of this thesis.

Regression analysis showed that social workers do not differ substantially in comparison to their co-workers. Although social workers displayed somewhat higher user-oriented competency, this differences did not reach statistical significance. With respect to market-oriented competency, there were statistically significant differences in that social workers scored slightly lower on this dimension. However, the differences were rather small and trifling.

In addition, the mediated role of attitudes towards conditionality were examined, showing that some of the association between educational background and market-oriented competency was mediated through attitudes towards conditionality. However, this mediation effect appeared rather unsubstantial. Hence, although it could be that social workers' report of slightly less market competency can be due to their less positive attitudes towards conditionality, the main picture here is that these attitudes do not have a considerable impact on their competency acquisition.

5.3 Paper 3

Paper III: Associations between workplace learning patterns, social support and perceived competency

Sole author: Talieh Sadeghi

In this paper on workplace learning, the concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning was applied as a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the findings. The aim was to examine workplace learning in the context of activation work. More specifically, I asked: how do workers learn on the workplace and what are the associations between the various learning patterns and perceived competency. In addition, I investigated the moderating role of social support in the intersection between learning patterns and competencies.

First, it was revealed that the most frequently reported learning pattern was self-learning, followed by informal guidance. Continuing education seemed to be the least applied learning pattern. Regression analysis showed that workplace courses had the strongest association to perceived competency, even after controlling for length of experience. Self-learning displayed moderate association to perceived competency. Strikingly, informal guidance, being the most applied learning pattern showed no significant association with perceived learning.

However, interaction analysis showed that for those experiencing high levels of supervisor support, both informal and systematic guidance were associated with perceived competency. Peer support did not reveal similar effects. Taken together, the findings of this article demonstrate the superiority of the non-formal learning pattern of workplace courses and the importance of supervisor support in promoting learning outcomes.

5.4 Paper 4

Paper IV: Frontline workers' dedication in an activation work context

Submitted to International Journal of Social Welfare (may[19] 2020)

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In the last paper of this thesis, frontline workers' dedication to work as a dimension of work engagement was explored in the context of activation work. The overall research question was related to the relative role of workers' educational background and perceptions of job characteristics on dedication to work. Workers were divided into five educational categories: social work, health care, social sciences, finance/administration and lower education (workers without higher education).

Results revealed that all workers were highly dedicated to their work. Furthermore, all groups reported rather high demands, but even higher degrees of control and support. In comparison to educational background, the job characteristics demand, control and especially support wielded relative strong relationships with dedication for the whole sample. Educational background was not substantially associated with dedication. Social workers did not differ from those with other educational backgrounds. Surprisingly, those without higher education scored slightly, but significantly higher on dedication than their co-workers. These results sustained even after controlling for a wide range of variables.

Sub group analysis showed both similarities and differences between the educational groups with regard to predictors of dedication. For all groups, control and support appeared as salient predictors for their dedication. With regard to perceptions of demands, the analysis showed associations with dedication only for social workers and workers with education within social sciences. An unexpected finding in this study was that social workers' somewhat less positive attitudes towards conditionality did not influence their dedication to work.

6 Discussion

The previous chapters in this thesis form the basis for the discussions unfolding in this chapter. To reiterate, the chief research question I posed for this PhD. project sounded as follows: What is the relative role of educational and workplace qualification and socialisation for activation workers' perceived competency and dedication to work? The overall finding of this thesis indicated that the workplace is a more decisive arena for qualification and socialisation. More specifically, in comparison with educational background, the workplace factors learning patterns and job demands and resources were more influential in explaining variations among workers regarding their perceived competency and dedication.

Thus, social workers, often viewed as possessing the most relevant educational background did not differ substantially from co-workers with respect to perceived competency and dedication. This finding could be due to potential conflicts between social work values and those underpinning activation policies. However, other findings in this thesis indicated that the practices in the Norwegian activation work context are perceived as relatively mild in which elements of social disciplining of clients are rarely present. Accordingly, there seems to be a rather good fit between social work repertoire and the ways activation work is understood in the frontlines by the managers.

Based on these findings from the four papers in this thesis, I attempt to provide a discussion of the answers to the overall research question in light of theoretical perspectives and prior research as presented in the previous chapters of this thesis. This chapter is mainly divided in four parts. The first section (6.1) deals with the overall research question and provides discussions regarding why workplace factors plays a more important role than educational background in explaining workers' perceived competency and dedication. The second part (6.2) is concerned with the relationship between social work and activation work and attempts to discuss why social workers did not differ substantially from colleagues in the findings of this thesis. The third part (6.3) provides discussions regarding the importance of the workplace as a qualifying and socialising arena. The final part (6.4) is concerned with the implications of the thesis and in addition offers some concluding remarks.

6.1 Workplace qualification and socialisation matter more than educational background for activation workers' perceived competency and dedication.

Taken together, the articles comprising this thesis revealed that in the specific context of activation work, the workplace is a more decisive setting than educational background in terms of type and length. Several explanatory frameworks seem plausible here. These are concerned with the distinction between the human capital theory and the signalling hypothesis, the lack of a dedicated education for activation work, the specificity of the outcome variables utilised in this thesis and recency effects.

The lack of associations between educational background and perceived competency and dedication yield support to the signalling hypothesis, rather than the human capital theory. According to Andreassen's (2017) analysis of vacancy announcements, educated individuals have been prioritised in recruitment of new workers in NAV. However, in the specific context of activation work, neither previous research, nor the results of the study at hand suggest possible effects of higher education for workers' outcomes related to performance in accordance with the human capital perspective. The preference for higher educated individuals could be due to the common employer view that persons who manage to complete an educational programme possess desirable characteristics like endurance and motivation which are beneficial for work performance.

Closely related to this latter reasoning, the findings of this thesis can be interpreted in light of theory and research suggesting that there is a gap between knowledge acquired in higher education and knowledge needed in order to successfully carry out daily work tasks (Skårderud, Fauske, Nygren, Nilsen & Kollestad, 2005; Burns & Poster, 2008; Dunne & Rawlins, 2000). This gap is perhaps even more urgent in the absence of a dedicated educational programme for the specific context of activation work. Learning and socialising in the workplace occurs in proximity to the actual work and thus becomes more salient. This argument should not be mistaken as a general critical stance on the impact of higher education per se. Rather, it is meant as a challenge towards the taken for granted view assuming exclusively elevated outcomes of education. My claim is therefore that instead of taking the qualification outcomes of higher education for granted, one should rather constantly subjugate it research and scrutiny.

In the theory and prior research chapter of this thesis two distinctions related to educational background were introduced, namely the divide between higher educated workers

and those lacking such education, professionally educated as opposed to those with liberal educations. As the findings of this thesis showed quite modest differences along these dimensions, one could argue that these distinctions are rather unsound, at least when applied to the Norwegian activation work context.

In line with the human capital theory, one could expect that workers with higher education would be more qualified and thus perform tasks in relation to activation work more competently. This could very well be the case. However, in as far as perceived competency and dedication to work can be regarded as indications for work performance, such differences were absent. Thus, the actual qualifying effects of higher education are called into questioned, at least in the context of activation work in NAV. As a previous report (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019) using the same material underlying this thesis showed, workers without higher education are on average approximately ten years older than workers with higher education. There are thus reasons to believe that these workers are more experienced and thereby to a higher extent qualified through work life than their educated colleagues.

Furthermore, the analytical distinction between professional education (e.g. social workers) and liberal educations (for example those with education in social sciences) did not prove to be valid, as far as the results of this thesis are concerned. This finding challenges the assumed links between professional education (e.g. social work education usually viewed as the most relevant education for work in NAV) and tasks in the frontlines of activation work. Alternatively, one could argue that social work education (or any other field of study for that matter) is not more dedicated education for activation work than other educational programmes.

As higher education is mainly meant to provide general socialisation and generic knowledge and as such prepare students for further and concrete learning in the workplace (Eraut, 2000) the general finding of non-effects of higher education does not appear surprising. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the generic qualification and socialisation assumed to be acquired in the higher education setting should, if efficient, somehow visualise itself when worker outcomes are measured. However, previous research has pointed out that workplace learning can be more efficient than higher education with regards to acquiring job-related skills (Eraut, 1994). The few outcome variables applied in this study are intimately and concretely related to workplace affairs and thereby explaining why the workplace matters more than educational background. Perhaps effects of higher education would be visible in a study where other outcomes variables and more generic variables were measured. However, other outcome measures have been applied in previous studies, yielding approximately the

same results. For example, Terum and Sadeghi (2019) demonstrated that educational background was neither correlated to activation workers' perception of the quality of their own work, nor the perception of how relevant their competencies are for their work.

In addition, the recency effect, understood as the impact more recent learning and exposure have on individuals' perceptions, could serve as a possible explanation for why workplace qualification and socialisation to a higher extent played a role in workers' perceived competency and dedication. It is plausible to assume that for most workers surveyed in this thesis, workplace experiences represent more recent occurrences than those workers' were exposed to during their education. Hence, workplace factors appear more influential in explaining variations among workers due to the recency effect.[21]

6.2 Social work and activation work

If we accept the scholarly stance that social work education imparts special competencies attitudes and expertise particularly relevant for discretionary activation work (McDonald & Marston, 2008) and that social work despite its struggles with the notion of professionalism should be the referential model for professionalization of activation work (Nothdurfter, 2016), one would expect social workers to score higher on desirable measures such as perceived competency and dedication to work. However, the potential conflicts between social work and activation work previously proposed by for instance Hasenfeld (1999) could serve as an explanation to the non-differences found in this thesis between social workers and colleagues. For my purposes, the central question here is whether the claims made by Hasenfeld has validity for the Norwegian context. In other words, does the Norwegian activation work context represent elements previously identified as conflictual with social work values?

In order to determine the role of educational background for qualification and socialisation for a given work context, it is important to explore how the work is perceived. The first article in this thesis contributed to the PhD. project by addressing the question of perceptions of policy objectives and frontline provision of activation policies in Norway. It was revealed that the managers adhered to the broad definition of activation, indicative of ambitions of an overarching social inclusion and client empowerment. In alignment with the human capital and social integration approach prevalent in the Nordic countries, activation

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[21] This issue could be further explored by including the length of experience item in the survey. However, as mentioned in the chapter regarding methodology, this item has some shortcomings which makes it challenging in analysis.

work with the objective of social inclusion requires competencies, such as interpersonal skills, communicative skills, "person-in-environment" framework which analytically coincides with social work competency repertoire. In addition, the perception of mildness, client-sensitivity and a rather dimmed discourse of disciplinary elements of implementation practices, as demonstrated by the findings of this article, corresponds well with the social service orientation embedded in the social work ethos. Indeed, the recurrent rhetoric regarding conditions and sanctions as pedagogical tool and social treatment bear a clear resemblance to the social pedagogical lines of thinking embedded in social work history and tradition (Lødemel, 2019; Lorenz, 1994).

Thus, as opposed to the ways activation work is implemented in other countries such as the Anglosphere (Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011; Lens, 2011) and Continental European countries (Eleveld, 2017) with a stronger emphasis on harshness and demanding elements, the Norwegian activation context, as perceived by the interviewed managers, tends to represents a good fit and relatively adequate arena for social workers to thrive and carry out activation work in close connection to social work ideals. As Caswell and Larsen (2017) have noted, it is the disciplining elements of activation policies that potentially conflicts with social work values. Accordingly, when harsh and disciplining aspects are not perceived as a pivotal part of the Norwegian activation work, conflict with social work decreases.

It is thus reasonable to believe that the critical stance on the compatibility between social work and activation policies endorsed by scholars like Hasenfeld (1999) and Handler (2014) has lower applicability in the Norwegian activation context where the implementation is perceived as mild and client-sensitive. Furthermore, due to the ongoing interconnectedness between social work and authorities (social workers in Norway have usually been employed by municipal authorities to implement social assistance and services) social work and policy reforms may have undergone a common developmental path with mutual influence. In this way, the potential tensions between social work and activation policy may have been dampened.

From a social work perspective, although the paternalistic justificatory narrative for welfare conditionality provided by the informants represents a traditional issue of tension for the social work profession, it is still a far more viable justification than the alternatives such as economic efficiency arguments. As indicated in the introductory sections, the paternalistic helping paradigm represents one of the embraced approaches in the history of social work and has been regarded as reconcilable with the alternative paradigm of client self-determination and empowerment (Bransford, 2011).

Client presenteism as enforced by sanctions is considered a last resort and in the clients own interest. When clients are present and participate in the various activity measures, frontline workers have the opportunity to "work on them", and in effect reinforcing the "cash and care" approach embedded in the Norwegian social assistance history. This finding coincides with another study from a Danish context (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015) and demonstrates the similarities in justificatory narratives between the Scandinavian countries with a rather common ideological discourse regarding welfare policies and large proportion of social workers implementing social policy.

Indeed, a paramount prerequisite for social work ideals to flourish is working environments where social treatment i.e. client care, help, empowerment work, trustful relationship building can be provided. This is only possible when clients are available and present in social workers' perimeters. Moreover, as article 4 demonstrates, frontline workers in NAV report of having relatively high degrees of control in their work. This concept of control is intimately related to that of discretionary capacities, representing one of the hallmarks of professional work.

As demonstrated above, there are reasons to believe that there are few overt conflicts between social work values and the policy objectives and implementation practices in the Norwegian activation context, as perceived by the managers in local NAV offices. In fact, there seems to be a feasible match between social work values and competencies and activation policies in Norway. This might also serve as an explanation for the rather stability in the total amount of social workers in the Norwegian NAV (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019) as opposed to for instance Denmark with a considerable decline in the number of social workers (Caswell & Larsen, 2017). Whereas social workers in Denmark have been blamed for the implementation deficits with respect to the disciplining elements of activation work, Norwegian social workers have enjoyed a better repute and standing in the public debate. Thus, notwithstanding the similarities between Norway and Denmark as noted above, we have also witnessed these differences.

From a Norwegian perspective, critical stands on the relationship between social work and activation work have mainly focused on how governance related issues such as NPM techniques threatens the room for social work in NAV (Sjefstad, 2013; Røysum, 2013). In particular, standardisation, which often result in curtailment of discretion, and heavy workloads due to efficiency measures have been emphasised as conflictual with social work approaches. These issues are not explicitly examined in the thesis at hand. However, some of the material underpinning this thesis can be viewed as yielding support to this statement. For

example, as article 4 shows, social workers are among the few educational groups (alongside workers with social sciences education) for whom perceptions of workload (demand) are associated with their dedication to work. Nonetheless, the whole picture here is that social workers perceive their working conditions (demands, control and support) just as adequate as other workers, and are approximately as dedicated to their work as colleagues. This might indicate that despite the scholarly concerns, social workers in NAV are to a relatively low degree affected by the potential conflicts between social work and activation work.

The discussions elaborated above suggest that the explanation for the non-differences between social workers and colleagues does not solely lie in potential valueational conflicts between social work and activation work. There are thus reasons to believe that the explanation for this finding lies elsewhere. The next sections attempt to provide more detailed discussions in proximity to the thesis' outcome variables perceived competency and dedication.

6.2.1 Social workers and colleagues

The scholarly literature on professionalization of activation work has been limited (Nothdurfter, 2016). Nevertheless, scholars have maintained that social workers should inform social policy and employment services in activation contexts (McDonald & Marston, 2008). The nature of these proposals however, are highly analytical and somewhat ideological. They are to a limited extent grounded in empirical works. Moreover, even though my analysis of the relationship between social work ideals and activation work in the above sections showed a relatively good fit, this is however insufficient in order to determine whether individual social workers actually positively differ from co-workers. Thus, in this thesis, it is argued that empirical comparisons are needed in order to assess whether and how social workers make a difference in an activation work context.

In terms of determining whether social workers positively differ from co-workers, articles 2 and 4 in this thesis found that the differences are rather limited. Social workers neither displayed higher competency scores, nor did they report higher degrees of dedication to their work. In the next sections I initially intend to provide some detailed discussions of the findings regarding both competency and dedication and finally I attempt to offer more general considerations in relation to these results and the overall indications.

One of the main findings in the second article was that social workers did not perceive themselves as more competent, neither with regards to user-oriented competency, nor market-oriented competency, with the former representing a more surprising result. Indeed, with the

emphasis on interpersonal skills, communicative skills etc. it is rather striking that social workers did not provide higher self-reported competency scores, in comparison to non-social workers. This could be explained in terms of self-report bias, meaning that the most competent workers tend to be more critical of their own abilities. However, there is a lack of solid research findings supporting such assumptions.

Another possible explanation of this counterintuitive finding is that there is a potential gap between social work curriculum, emphasising interpersonal skills and client-oriented work and the actual learning outcomes for students of social work. Closely related to this is the issue of transfer referring to "the learning process involved when a person learns to use previously acquired knowledge/skills/competence/expertise in a new situation" (Eraut, 1994, p.212). Challenges may occur in these processes denoted as transferal challenges, indicating that the transfer of knowledge from the education setting to workplace settings is not a straightforward process (Smeby, 2013). Thus, workers' competencies are not always in accurate accordance with their educational curriculum, and therefore one should be cautious with respect to inferences from curricula to acquired skills and knowledge.

As the factor analysis in the second article showed, activation competency comprises not only user-oriented competency, but also market-oriented competency. On this basis, the authors in this article argued that these two competencies should be considered as distinct underlying dimensions of activation competency. As the results further suggested, social workers scored slightly, but significantly lower than their non-social worker counterparts on the market-oriented competency dimension. Although significant, I argue here that these differences are unsubstantial, representing a less surprising finding than that regarding user-oriented competency. Traditionally, social work curriculum has not paid considerable attention to market and employment service-oriented competencies (Hagelund, 2016). It should be noted though that, to my knowledge, this kind of competency is not represented in other educational curricula either. The Norwegian social work curriculum was previously assumed to constitute a preparation for frontline work in the former social assistance offices, among others. However, as we have seen, activation work has altered the work in the frontlines of labour and welfare agencies and thus social workers no longer take precedence over workers with other educational backgrounds. When no single dedicated educational programme specifically preparing for activation work exists (Bay, Breit, Fossestøl, Grødem & Terum, 2016), no one is privileged with a head start.

Similar to the findings above, article 4 showed no differences in degree of dedication between social workers and workers with other educational backgrounds. The exception here

was workers without higher education, scoring slightly, however unsubstantially higher than their educated counterparts. Due to the assumed relevance of social work competency repertoire and the underlying social work values allegedly fostering public sector motivation (Bangcheng, 2009; Vandenabeele, 2011), it appeared rather surprising that social workers did not display higher degrees of dedication when compared to colleagues. In addition, the result revealing that those without higher education scored higher on dedication than colleagues suggests that educational background is not the significant arena in which dedication to activation work is generated.

The findings of non-difference between social workers and non-social workers raises the important question of exactly how unique and of special relevance social work actually is for frontline work in an activation context. The complexity of the tasks imbedded in the nature of activation work might serve as an explanation to these results. Accordingly, one cannot designate one singular educational background as the most appropriate. Hence, it is plausible to assume that the increasingly broad recruitment in the NAV (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019)[22] serves the purpose of promoting a competency diversity required in the frontlines of this particular organisation.

On the other hand, the actual range of the assumed "wide recruitment" in NAV may be questioned here. After social workers, the largest sub group of workers have educational background within social sciences, such as sociology and social anthropology. Social work being based on borrowed theories derived from a variety of social science disciplines, arguably display similarities with these educational backgrounds. For instance, there is a common recognition that social work and sociology share the same views on social problems, solidarity and the relationship between the individual and society (Heraud, 2016).

In agreement with previous research (van Berkel & Knies, 2018; Blomberg, Kroll, Kallio & Erola, 2013; Kallio & Kouvo, 2015), articles 2 and 4 in this thesis showed that social workers are somewhat more sceptical towards the conditionality component of activation policies. This social work perspective has been assumed to potentially influence their approach to activation work (van Berkel, 2019) and possibly also their dedication to this specific work context and competency acquisition. However, as the aforementioned articles showed, social workers' more negative attitudes towards conditionality did not substantially

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[22] In this study, it was found that there is an increasingly broad recruitment in NAV in the sense that more workers with diverse educational backgrounds are employed at the expense of workers without higher education. The proportion of employees with higher education other than social work has increased from 34% in 2011 to 46% in 2018. However, as noted in page 51, there is rather stability in the total number of social workers in the time period of 2011 to 2018.

impact their dedication, nor their perceived competency. This finding can be interpreted in light of the findings of article 1. Although social workers on a general level yield more negative views on conditionality, it could very well be that they (like the managers interviewed in article 1 tend to perceive the actual conditionality practices in the frontlines as reasonable and ethically unproblematic. Although not directly addressed in this thesis, other scholars have confirmed this assumption (Gjersøe, Leseth & Vilhena, 2019; Vilhena, 2020). This in turn might serve as an explanation for why social workers' somewhat negative attitudes towards conditionality do not influence their dedication and competency acquisition.

Another possible explanation for these findings could be related to broader institutional-cultural contextual features. Norway, representing one of the most egalitarian societies in the world (Williams & Mitchell, 1989; Karlsen, 2018; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2010), fundamentally rooted in a long tradition of social democratic values do not deviate substantially from the core of social service orientation. In other words, the Norwegian overall culture valorising human rights, social rights, justice and poverty alleviation, etc. harmonises well with social work values. This could have a dampening effect on the socialising influences students gain from social work training in Norway, as the cultural norms outside the social work educational setting resembles the values imparted through the curriculum. In contrast to Anglosphere countries heavily relying on neoliberal values, in the Norwegian context, social work do not represent a particular set of values dissimilar from those the rest of the society (and students with other educational backgrounds) endorse. Accordingly, social workers in Norway are not "one of their kind" and therefore tend to appear rather similar when compared to co-workers.

6.3 Workplace factors

As previously stated by scholars, there is currently no particular curriculum preparing students for activation work, neither in Norway (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019), nor internationally (Baadsgaard, Jørgensen, Nørum & Olesen, 2014; van Berkel & Knies, 2018). This fact yields more momentum to the workplace as a qualifying and socialising arena. Accordingly, one of the proposals in this thesis is the recognition of the workplace in analysis of the occupational context of activation work. As we have seen, the overall results of this study do not support the view that the social work education qualifies and socialises individuals differently or more adequately than other educational backgrounds for activation work. Nor does any other educational background stand out as a particularly better fit in comparison to colleagues.

Thus, it seems that in the absence of a dedicated educational programme, the workplace gains more significance for the purpose of equipping workers with common and adequate competencies, motivations and attitudes. It is evidently in the workplace setting that dedication, motivation and important competency requirements are developed and shaped. In effect, how the workplace facilitates and supports learning, competency development and dedication to work, occupy centre stage.

Papers 3 and 4 demonstrate that certain perceived job characteristics and learning types are more or less associated with respectively dedication and perceived competency. In the next sections I provide an overview and discussions of the articles' findings regarding how competency and dedication are promoted in the workplace.

6.3.1 The golden middle way: between formal and informal learning

As noted previously, non-formal learning is localised at the intersection between formal and informal learning. The absence of a dedicated educational programme can help explain why neither formal (higher education), nor informal learning types (e.g. informal guidance by a colleague) were associated with the outcome variables in this thesis. Rather, as the findings in articles 2, 3 and 4[23] together show, it is the non-formal learning, as a middle state between the formal and the informal that explained most of the variance in the outcome variables.

Conducting activation work is a complex task and require explicit, factual knowledge as well as practical knowledge. The formal learning in the educational setting can be regarded as too distant to equip workers with the required explicit and concrete competency. The informal workplace learning do not seem to be able to provide the formalised knowledge workers need sufficiently. Hence, non-formal learning localised at the intersection between the formal and informal satisfy workers need for formalised and concrete knowledge intimately connected to work tasks. This finding coincides with previous research (e.g. Dimeff, Koerner, Woodcock, Beadnell, Brown, Skutch, Paves, Bazinet & Harnes, 2009; Jayawarna, Macpherson & Wilson, 2007)

Paper 3 in this thesis showed that despite the frequent usage reported by workers, informal guidance as a learning pattern did not relate significantly to perceived competency. This is a learning pattern NAV-offices often call "shoulder to shoulder" learning in which an

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[23] Articles 2 and 4 demonstrate that educational background (formal learning) does not explain variations in workers perceived competency and dedication. Article 3 showed that informal learning is not associated with perceived competency. Furthermore, this latter article also showed that the association between the formal (continuing education) learning types and perceived competency is rather unsubstantial.

employee consults with a colleague or a supervisor in relation to task execution (Helgøy, Nilssen & Kildal, 2011). Due to the recent acknowledgement of the effectiveness of informal workplace learning (Skule, 2004; Desjardins & Tuijnman, 2005), this is a somewhat unexpected finding. However, previous research have also documented the possible insufficiency of this learning pattern (Slotte, Tynjälä & Hytönen, 2004). Bad and inconsistent practices, and shirking of duties have been reported as some of the pitfalls of this kind of informal learning (Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2008).

6.3.2 Job demands and resources

The findings of this thesis regarding the negative associations between demands and dedication on the one hand, and positive associations between resources and dedication on the other corresponds well with previous research (Christian & Slaughter, 2007, Schaufeli & Salanova, 2008; Hakanen & Roodt, 2010; Prieto, soria, Martinez & Schaufeli, 2008). However, my findings offer new insights in relation to the research literature exploring activation work contexts. In their demonstration of the detrimental effects of high workloads in activation work contexts (Jewell, 2007; Nothdurfter, 2017; van Berkel & Knies, 2016), scholars have ignored the possible buffering effects of control and social support in the work site. My findings underline the importance of these job resources. Notwithstanding the high demands reported by the respondents in my study, their dedication remains high presumably due to the perception of even higher degrees of control and support, and as such lending support to the buffer hypothesis.

The concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) represent two different explanatory mechanisms offered in the scholarly literature on the links between job resources (support and control) and dedication (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). If we assume the intrinsic motivational explanation, the rationale would be that activation workers who experience high levels of control and support in their work environment have their basic human needs such as relatedness and autonomy fulfilled. In turn, these satisfied basic needs increase feelings of belonging and competency, closely related to dedication to work.

Alternatively, in terms of the external motivational explanation, one can assume that activation workers reporting of high levels of support and control are in return more willing to put considerable efforts in their work tasks and thus enhance the likelihood of successfully conducting the tasks at hand (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). One possible outcome of such efforts in an activation work context might be satisfied clients. Feedback from others, be it

supervisors, colleagues or clients could serve as external motivators for the workers. Hence, it could very well be that such circumstances increase the potential of dedication.

Due to the complex nature of activation work with incommensurable work roles, conflicting tasks and logics in direct interaction with citizens (see pages 19-22), the activation work setting is likely to be a demanding one, even beyond what the heavy work loads would imply. The activation workers are required to navigate in a highly challenging and occasionally exhausting working conditions with conflicting normative demands and deal with the constant need for balancing between clients' and organisational requirements. Like several other human service organisations, the activation work context is characterised by fussy and ambiguous work roles (Zacka, 2017; Maynard-Moody & Mucheno, 2000), ill-defined rules and procedures (Sainsbury, 2008), and stressful work environments (Blomberg Kallio, Kroll & Saarinen, 2015). It is plausible to assume that in such work conditions, the job resources control and support are even more essential than other work settings without such psychological demands. Thus, the workers' needs for autonomy, belonging and mastery are presumably decisive in an activation work context with demands of individualised services, both for the purposes of worker wellbeing, organisational goal achievements and beneficial client services.

In addition to the links between JDCS and dedication, the fourth paper in this thesis shed light on the state of art regarding frontline workers perception of control, which relates closely to the concept of discretion. As noted in previous sections, the degree of discretionary spaces granted to activation workers vary considerably across national models (van Berkel, 2017). As this thesis lacks an empirical comparative component, one cannot straightforwardly infer comparative assertions. However, the high levels of perceived control reported by the Norwegian frontline workers in this study are unlikely to be replicated in countries with a more bureaucratic frontline work design and approach. Based on comparative studies, Jewell (2007) have maintained that countries with a large proportion of social workers in the frontlines, such as Sweden, have wider discretionary space. The Norwegian activation context resembles the Swedish with respect to the proportion of social workers and the room for professional work ethos, which might explain the high levels of control (discretion) reported in paper 4.

Abstracted from the activation work context, another explanation to the high levels of both control and support reported by the workers in this study may lie in the general Norwegian model of labour relations with emphasis on employee participation and workplace

supportive culture (Hofstede, 1984; Shcramm-Nielsen, Lawrence & Sivesind, 2004; Bergene & Hansen, 2016).

The relatively few and moderate differences between the various educational groups with regard to determinants of dedication found in paper 4 indicate two distinct issues. First, in alignment with the other findings of this thesis, this implies that workers' educational backgrounds do not make a substantial difference. As demonstrated, the links between job resources and dedication were quite similar for the various educational groups. Another implication of this finding is that it confirms the robustness of the JDCS model's ability to predict workers' dedication across different groups of employees.

6.3.3 General considerations on workplace factors

As separate as papers 3 and 4 in this thesis ostensibly may seem, there are nonetheless intricate interconnectedness between them, making the combination a potent contribution to the theoretical understanding of the role of workplace factors on workers' learning and motivation in the specific context of activation work. Both distinct components of JDCS (demand, control and support) and the model as a whole are decidedly relevant to the aforementioned papers. First, as the two papers demonstrate, social support from colleagues and supervisors represent a principal workplace feature for both learning (paper 3) and dedication to work (paper 4).

Second, there is an extant body of literature showing that dedication to work (topic of inquiry in paper 4) is tightly linked to learning and competency (topic of inquiry in paper 3) in an interactive way (e.g. Bakker, Demerouti & Brummelhuis, 2012; Chughtai & buckley, 2011; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2015). Indeed, dedicated activation workers put more efforts in their jobs and hence engage more frequently and vigilantly in learning activities, which in turn might enhance their competencies and otherwise sense of mastery. This sense of mastery can also be an augmenting force in workers' motivation and reinforce their dedication. Thus, it is plausible to assume that highly dedicated activation workers are also exceedingly confident in their own competency level and visa versa. These workers are more likely to deliver better services to clients.

Finally, as the experience of learning opportunities at the workplace is an important factor explaining the degree workers engage in learning activities, scholars have attempted to map the influence of job related factors on workers' perception of learning opportunities. In an effort to reconcile the theoretical frameworks of JDCS and workplace learning, van Ruysseveldt and Dijke (2011) have explored the optimal combinations of control and

workload in relation to workers' subjective experiences of learning opportunities. They found that workload was related to learning opportunities at the worksite in an inverted u-shaped nature. This means that workers' experience of learning opportunities is at it's highest when workload is moderate (neither very low, nor high). Furthermore, their interaction analysis also revealed that low levels of autonomy reduced the positive effects of moderate workload on learning opportunities. In addition, high autonomy prevented the destructive effects of high workload on learning opportunities. Accordingly, the findings of papers 4 in this thesis showing that workers perceive both their workload and autonomy (control) as relatively high, might buffer the possible detrimental effects of workload on learning opportunities.

6.4 Implications and concluding remarks

6.4.1 Implications for future research

This thesis represent an attempt to contribute to our theoretical understanding of the occupational context of activation work. From an analytic point of view, it is argued here that workplace factors should be recognised in conceptualisation of the occupational context. As have been demonstrated, the empirical findings underpinning this thesis yield support to this view. I therefore hope that future analytical and empirical investigations of this occupational context take workplace factors into account, alongside educational backgrounds of workers.

Due to the limited scope of one singular thesis and the methodological limitations discussed in chapter 5, this study implies some recommendations for future research. As previously noted, one of the most salient methodological issues in this thesis is the use of self-reported competency. Due to the construct validity limitations of this measurement, future research could attempt to approach this important topic by drawing on collateral information. For example, other stakeholders, such as clients or supervisors could be included in such worker assessments in order to strengthen the validity of the competency measure. Moreover, in order to assess any differences between social workers and colleagues in an activation work context, representing the focal point of inquiry in this thesis, it could be useful to apply further outcome variables such as turn over intentions, job satisfaction and burn out.

Indeed, the outcome variables perceived competency and dedication to work have been assumed to operate as mediators in the relationship between worker characteristics (Adekola, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Jones et al., 2013) and performance or service quality. Future studies could attempt to focus on actual practices and concentrate more on uncovering possible direct relations between these latter concepts in the specific context of

activation work. With reference to figure 1 (see page 9), this concerns the stripped lines directed towards work performance and service quality. For instance, one could explore whether workers experiencing high degrees of control and support in the worksite are better able to facilitate client services and thus achieve more satisfied clients and higher transition to the labour market.

Moreover, although the material comprising this particular thesis found little support for the view that diverse educational backgrounds make a difference in the frontlines of activation work, the scope of the empirical evidence of the thesis in hand is far from sufficient to refute that there might be significant differences between for instance social workers and colleagues. Future research, further exploring any such differences are warranted. It remains to see whether there are significant differences between social workers and colleagues of such character that it legitimises social work as the best suited educational background of those workers supposedly holding «the keys to a dimension of citizenship». Furthermore, whether the finding of limited impact of educational background of workers can be generalised to other work contexts is yet to be explored empirically.

As previously emphasised (see pages 54-55), there is a lack of internationally validated measurements of some of the major study variables in this thesis. More scholarly attention towards methodological issues and measurement development could be fruitful for future research. For example, thorough conceptualisations and measurement development of central concepts such as professionalism, workplace learning patterns, activation competency and attitudes towards conditionality would be beneficial for this field of research. Aside from validity issues, this is also beneficial for the purposes of comparing studies across time and space, and achieving aggregated bodies of knowledge in the field of activation policy research.

Moreover, as suggested in previous research, supporting vulnerable client groups (remote from the labour market) could be assumed to require other forms of competency than clients closer to the labour market (van Berkel, 2019). This thesis has not made an attempt at distinguishing between activation work tasks and competencies in relation to various client groups. Thus, future research should focus on this issue and provide insights into competency requirements for various client groups. An interesting query in this regard is whether social work competency repertoire is best suited for the most vulnerable client groups. In addition, in continuation of the third paper in this thesis, it could be examined whether workers with differential educational backgrounds have dissimilar susceptibility for various learning patterns.

Finally, the cross-sectional design of this this thesis has made causal inferences challenging. Thus, future research could benefit from other research designs like for instance RCTs or other longitudinal studies. For example, in order to assess the effect of various learning patterns, one could adopt an RCT design and as such enhance the internal validity of the research, although this could imply greater issues with the external validity.

6.4.2 Implications for practice

One of the main findings of this thesis is that the workplace learning patterns and perceived job characteristics matter more for the formation of workers' perceived competency and dedication than educational background. This finding raises important questions regarding recruitment strategies based upon educational background in circumstances where there is a lack of a dedicated educational programme for the tasks and requirements in the activation work frontlines. Hence, this study suggests that the workplace as a learning and development arena is of paramount importance. More specifically, the context of activation work should direct its attention on how to facilitate competency development and dedication within the organisation.

Thus, there is a need for a stronger focus on human resource management in NAV. Greater attention should be paid to job design and redesign aimed at changing the sources of the well-being of their employees. Previous research has shown that interventions like increasing team and individual autonomy, and higher focus on organising workplace learning programs in the organisation have positive effects on worker well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014) and learning (Poell & van der Krogt, 2014). Management is an important key factor in these processes because they can influence workers' demands and resources (Nielsen, Randall, Yarker & Brenner, 2008). As a research funder, NAV ought to put more weight on granting funds to research exploring how the above mentioned interventions could best be implemented.

Likewise, workplace training as a cornerstone of human resources management should to a greater extent be prioritised and NAV should thereby adopt a more long-term, sustainable and conscious competency strategy. For example, as the findings of the present thesis suggest no association between informal guidance and perceived competency, NAV should question the sustainability of continuing in the same path. Despite the higher costs of provision of formal courses for workers, given the strong association with perceived competency revealed in this thesis, they could nevertheless be a more cost effective learning pattern for the organisation in the long run.

However, the recommendations presented here should be treated with caution in accordance with previous warnings regarding professionalising activation work in the absence of a clearly defined "profession" (van Berkel et al., 2010). Hence, at the same time, the debate on establishment of a dedicated educational programme for activation work, either based on social work or a new direction should be put on the agenda.

6.4.3 Conclusion

"Holding the keys to a dimension of citizenship" (Lipsky, 2010), activation workers in the welfare state are expected to be dedicated to their work and perform their tasks in competent ways. With the occupational context of activation work as the focal point, this thesis has developed knowledge on the relative role of educational background and the workplace as arenas for qualification and socialisation for activation work. The results revealed that the latter is a more decisive arena for workers perceived competency and dedication. Thus, the analytical framework of the occupational context of activation work should be broadened to also include the workplace as an important arena for workers' training, qualification and socialisation processes. Hence, the findings of this thesis have implications for both our theoretical conceptualisation of the occupational context of activation work and the practice field's understanding of key factors explaining workers' qualification and socialisation processes.

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Article 1

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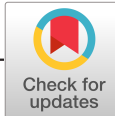
Frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of behavioural conditionality

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Abstract

The debate on behavioural conditionality is characterised by abundant controversies. Frontline managers have a particularly important role in implementing these policies because their interpretation of the welfare policies regulates the frameworks of street-level bureaucrat's discretionary powers. A nationwide survey among frontline managers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration revealed that 86% of the managers expressed strong normative support towards welfare conditionality. With this as a backdrop, this paper develops a better understanding of managers' perceptions and justifications of the Norwegian type of behavioural conditionality. Analysis of focus group interview data showed that the managers adopted a broad definition of conditionality, meaning promotion of an overall (re)integration of the client into the society as opposed to the narrow definition focusing solely on labour market integration. Furthermore, the implementation of welfare conditionality primarily was perceived as mild and client sensitive. The managers mainly justified welfare conditionality in terms of care and paternalistic defences, arguing that requirement of work and activities are in the client's best interest, understood in terms of social democratic values.

KEYWORDS
behavioural conditionality, frontline managers, justifications, paternalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Throughout Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, activation policies, understood as a set of measures designed to integrate jobless people into the labour market (Dingeldey, 2007; Eichhorst, Kaufmann, Konle-Seidl, & Reinhard, 2008), have become increasingly widespread and applicable to a growing number of target groups and benefit areas. Behavioural conditionality, being one such measure, is the requirements of ongoing behavioural compliance for welfare benefit receipt. Within the Norwegian social assistance scheme, this means mandatory participation in a wide range of activity measures, such as job-search centres, work-related activity centres, and various training programmes (Sadeghi & Terum, 2019).

Despite gross cross-national variations in the global north, conditionality has sparked ample research and debate characterised by abundant controversies. In particular, the justificatory and moral foundations of conditionality have been subject to heated debate. It has been argued that given the coercive quality of conditionality and, thus, challenges posed to notions of liberty, it requires thorough and robust justification (Kane & Köhler-Olsen, 2015; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Frontline managers have an important role in the implementation of behavioural conditionality policies because their interpretation of the welfare policies shape the organisational culture and regulate the frameworks of street-level bureaucrat's discretionary powers. Street-level management as an organisational authority operates as a mediator between rule-making politicians and de facto policy making street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). The degree of resistance of street-level bureaucrats towards policy objectives is partly contingent upon the subjective experience of legitimacy of the manager's orientations and justifications. Hence, how these managers perceive, interpret, and justify welfare policies have arguably major implications for frontline practices. In a similar vein, it has been argued that organisations and management matter in shaping street-level behaviour (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015).

A nationwide survey among frontline managers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NLWA) showed that 86% of the respondents expressed strong normative support towards behavioural conditionality.[1] Furthermore, the same survey revealed that only 54% of the managers believed that conditionality is an efficient means of getting people into work.[2] Given the controversies surrounding conditionality, explanations as to why the frontline managers endorse and justify conditionality remain unclear. How can we understand the statistical gap between those who normatively support conditionality and those who believe it is an efficient means of getting people into work? Motivated by this, the purpose of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the frontline manager's perceptions and justification of conditionality.

The NWLA constitutes an interesting case in this regard for several reasons. The administration is organised as a multipurpose one-stop shop with a breadth of tasks and large local autonomy (Minas, 2014). The staff, which administer the social assistance scheme, are highly professionalised with trained social workers as the largest profession (Terum, Torsvik, & Øverbye, 2017). Even among the frontline managers, a third are educated as social workers.

Traditionally, the ethic of social work has been interpreted as in tension with the ideas underpinning conditionality (Hasenfeld, 1999; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018; Terum, Tufte, & Jessen, 2012). Nevertheless, by virtue of being frontline managers, it is also likely that they will tend to be oriented towards results related to policy objectives (Lipsky, 2010). Thus, they might be caught by a tension drawing in diametrically different directions (Evans, 2010). In addition, many NLWA offices are small, which means that the managers are also in daily face-to-face interaction with clients and perform the same street-level mandatory activation work as other frontline workers.[3] This organisational arrangement may have an augmenting effect on the aforementioned tension.

The principal aim of this paper is to investigate frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of conditionality. In addition, as justificatory defences of a given policy are mainly based on perceptions of the same policy, we will also address the question of how our informants conceptualise the context-specific conditionality.

Despite ample research attention directed towards welfare reform, rather few studies have examined frontline attitudes and justifications of conditionality. Also, these studies primarily concentrate on frontline workers, rather than managers, as is the case in our study. Furthermore, whereas studies of frontline responses have tended to be

dominated by anglo-sphere countries underpinned by neoliberal market oriented alignment, such as the US and the UK, the study at hand provides another, distinctive take on the issue, namely, a Norwegian frontline perspective, a context rooted in social democratic values, and to a nontrivial extent staffed with social workers.

2 | BEHAVIOURAL CONDITIONALITY

2.1 | Definitions

Justifications of a certain policy rely on how that policy is defined, interpreted, and organised. According to Øverbye (2000), there are roughly two ways to conceptualise conditionality. "Labour market activation" refers to integration of the unemployed into the labour market, whereas "social activation" is a broader concept aimed at bringing socially isolated people into different types of social communities. In a similar vein, Sabatinelli (2010) distinguishes between the narrow interpretation referring to disciplinary approaches with a unilateral focus on transition towards the labour market; in contrast, a broad definition of conditionality adopts a more multilateral focus in which the goal is to promote an overall (re)integration of the client into society. Integration into the labour market would often be viewed as one of several substantial forms of integration, and the aim here is to enhance the quality of the client's life. In a Belgium context, it was found that depending of a number of organisational factors, frontline workers differ in their interpretations of conditionality policies (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012). Those adopting a narrow definition adhere to a more disciplinary approach with their clients and develop a fatalistic view about their jobs. On the contrary, frontline workers with a broad definition of conditionality show a more tailor-made approach, and they perceive the aim of their work to be empowering their clients (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012).

Adoption of a broad approach to conditionality will presumably cultivate a holistic and client-centred orientation that in turn may influence frontline justifications of the policy.

2.2 | Design

Because of the major variations across national models with regards to the design and facility of conditionality throughout OECD countries (Eichhorst et al., 2008), it has been argued that each form of conditionality should be explored on its own merits in a context-specific manner (Geiger, 2017; Grant, 2011; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). This has major implications for the exploration of justificatory narratives. The central question in this regard is what is there to justify?

Notwithstanding substantial cross-national variations, Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018) have proposed three common defining features of behavioural conditionality, namely, behavioural requirements, monitoring, and sanctions. Although multifaceted, these components can be understood as continuums where the opposite poles represent harsh and onerous regimes on the one extremity, and human-capital oriented, mild, and client-sensitive regimes on the other (Langenbucher, 2015).

Behavioural requirements, or rather activity requirements, can be mild in the sense that they consist of elements of human capital enhancement such as formal education or courses, usually called enabling activities. On the other end of the scale are more demanding activities such as long-hour days of mandatory work activities in return for welfare benefits.

Monitoring and verification processes are indispensable features of conditionality. These processes vary substantially among national models. For example, who are the actors involved in the monitoring? In professionalised frontline organisations, granted high levels of discretionary powers, it is assumed that monitoring is less likely to be subject to strict regulation and performance-management processes in comparison with nations relying on bureaucratic organisations staffed with nonprofessionals (Terum, Torsvik, & Øverbye, 2018).

Variations in sanctioning regimes, that is, the scope and duration of sanctions are perhaps the most prominent difference between national models. In a recent comparative study of social assistance, Eleveld (2017) explored the strictness of sanctions in 25 European countries. At the intersection between monitoring and sanctioning, the existence of so-called mitigation clauses, assumed to contribute to the reasonableness and consistency of the system, were compared across the countries. Eleveld distinguishes between discretionary clause (discretionary capacities to the frontline in decisions regarding sanctions), good reason clause (if the client has a good reason for violation of requirement, sanctions will not be imposed), reparatory clause (benefit will be restored as soon as the client resumes the behavioural requirements), and hardship clause (clients may apply for some allowances to buy essential goods, such as food, after a sanction has been imposed), and finds that countries vary significantly in their legal and institutional framing with regards to these mitigation clauses.

The results from Eleveld's study revealed that Norway, in addition to being low on sanctioning strictness, is one of a few countries adopting all four mitigation clauses and thus scoring low on a sanction indicator, suggesting that an immediate risk of violating the fundamental right to minimum means of subsistence enshrined in various international treaties (e.g., European Consortium for Sociological Research) does not exist.

2.3 | Frontline responses to welfare reform: Attitudes towards and justifications of behavioural conditionality

The few studies investigating frontline responses to welfare conditionality across Western European countries and US reveal in general positive attitudes (Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco, & Ketch, 2009; Handler, 2004). However, the policy of compulsion in welfare reform is often justified by workers only if decent and meaningful activity measures are offered (Finn & Blackmore, 2001). Further, the forcible and punitive nature of conditionality and sanctioning regimes are found to be underrecognised by a variety of mechanism. For example, as Morgen, Acker, and Weight (2010) have demonstrated, frontline staff replace negatively laden terms such as "sanction" with the term "disqualification" in order to provide a discursively more positive framing of welfare reform as a constructive tool to foster client accountability and get the clients "back on track" (p. 62). In effect, frontline testimonies are characterised by rather few moral anguish in response to punitive and disciplinary welfare reforms.

A range of various justifications have been found to prevail among both workers and managers in the frontlines (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015; Handler, 2004; Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010). For example, in a study of frontline attitudes in an American context (Oregon) with severe "full family sanctions," it was revealed that workers and agency leaders articulated paternalistic[4] justifications for sanctions, as constructive means to re-engage clients in welfare-to-work practices for their own good (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010). Sanctions were viewed as a necessary tool to promote individual responsibility, empowerment, independence, and quality of life for the clients. Further, sanctions were not considered a punishment but rather a key tool to get "the client's attention" and as such a gentle nudge.

As welfare reform can be supported by multiple rationales (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011), workers may also embrace different kinds of justificatory stories. Thus, in addition to paternalistic justifications, caseload reduction has been a main reason for many workers to embrace welfare reform (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010). Also, arguments of fairness and fraud reduction have been used to justify the coercive nature of welfare conditionality in several studies (Morgen, Acker, & Weight, 2010; Handler, 2004).

2.4 | Drivers for Norwegian welfare conditionality

Being rooted in the Nordic model with emphasis on the human capital approach, the ideational drivers for Norwegian conditionality differ from that of the Anglo-sphere and continental countries. However, there are also some

similarities in drivers across national models. According to Lødemel and Trickey (2001), an important driver for conditionality in the Nordic countries has been to prevent social exclusion. Instead of emphasising individual and cultural factors as causes for worklessness, the Nordic countries tend to stress structural causes of worklessness, such as industrial restructuring resulting in skills mismatch between available labour supply and existing demands. According to this view, labour market integration is not just a matter of individual responsibility. Rather, it is assumed that greater emphasis on individual responsibility should be accompanied by a focus on developing better services and offering a wide range of training measures (Hernes, Heum, & Haavorsen, 2010).

By means of thorough analysis of Norwegian legislative documents, Eriksen and Molander have identified a specific fourfold justificatory set, that is, a repertoire of distinct arguments in favour of compulsory activation. Economic efficiency arguments refer to cost reductions and public savings potentially gained by implementing conditionality. Within the justice argument, conditionality is perceived as a tool for "balancing the rights and duties of claimants" and notions of fairness. Further, popular support arguments denote to the intention of increasing the legitimacy of welfare institutions. Finally, the care argument emphasises the need to make demands on people because passivity is viewed as harmful, whereas work and activities are believed to be central for health and well-being. Making demands on people is regarded as "taking them seriously and treating them with respect." When participation in activation programmes is made mandatory, this argument clearly resembles a paternalistic stance, holding that forcing people into compulsory activities can be defended because it is in the individual's own interest. In Eriksen and Molander's study, interviewed Norwegian politicians mainly articulated paternalistic justificatory narratives.

The paternalistic argument in the Norwegian public discourse is evidently different from that of Mead's moral judgementalism (Wright, 2012). Care, respect, and health concerns, being paramount components in the Norwegian rhetoric, are virtually absent in Mead's reasoning (1997). Furthermore, in the Norwegian discourse, harsh benefit sanctions are assumed to have a limited effect on people's willingness to work.

2.5 | Legal and institutional context

In Norway, social assistance is regulated in the "Social Services Act." The practical implementation though, is a local responsibility delegated to the municipalities and is in general characterised by a high degree of discretionary powers granted to the municipal street-level organisations mainly staffed by trained social workers.[5] As of 2017, an amendment (§20a) was added to the act that instructs the municipalities to set conditions for social assistance benefits for all claimants under the age of 30.

The wording in the former Social Services Act (§20) regarding conditionality was:

> It can be made demands for granting financial benefits, including that the beneficiary during the benefit period shall perform appropriate tasks in the municipality of residence.

The wording in the new amendment (§20a) instructs municipalities to set conditions for social assistance benefits for all claimants under the age of 30:

> It shall be made activity requirements for granting financial benefits to persons under the age of 30, unless weighty reasons speak against it.

As implied in the circular, whereas the former act imposed nonconditionality as the main rule, the recent act inculcates conditionality as the main rule. However, this alteration is mitigated by the wording "unless weighty reasons speak against it," indicating maintenance of reduced, however, substantial they may still be, discretionary capacities for implementers.

Notwithstanding the alteration of the legislation regarding behavioural requirements, the sanctioning section containing the "can" clause is unmodified, noting that:

> In case of violation of behavioural requirements, a decision can be made to reduce benefits, provided that the decision letter regarding benefits mentions the possibility of such reduction.

Several requirements must be met before the municipality can impose a sanction. First, the act requires that the reduction of monetary benefit follows a proportionality principle, and there is a requirement for all reductions that the benefit is not reduced below a decent minimum level. The social assistant recipient must be notified of a possible reduction in the original individual decision letter. Moreover, prior to the imposition of a sanction the municipality must make an assessment on whether the violation is a result of the client's lack of will or ability. In addition, the act instructs an even milder treatment of claimants with caring responsibilities for children and, as such, attempts to mitigate potential harm to third parties. In all cases sanction impositions, the clients are always entitled to have their basic needs covered, and thus, only a minor fraction of the monetary benefit may be reduced.

3 | METHODS

The study reported here is part of a larger project involving a quantitative survey of 1,700 frontline workers in 108 NLWA offices and several qualitative focus group interviews.[6] This study is based on focus group interviews with frontline managers in seven NWLA offices from two major regions of Norway. Focus group interviews are an appropriate method of identifying attitudes, frameworks of understanding and facilitating the expression of ideas through debate within the group (Kitzinger, 1995).

By means of our quantitative survey data from 108 offices, we were able to identify the size of the welfare offices, as well as the extent they practiced conditional cash transfers. The seven offices we strategically selected for the present study were relatively sizable and had previously in their survey response reported substantial experience in conditional cash transfers, as we believed these offices are better able to address our questions regarding attitudes and justifications of welfare conditionality. In all offices, all relevant managers were interviewed. The focus groups consisted of two to three participants, resulting in a total of 17 informants (nine women and eight men). Most of the informants (15 out of 17) were either head of the unit or head of a department in the organisation. Several of the frontline managers also reported that they had face-to-face interactions with clients. Ten of the informants were educated social workers, whereas the rest had various educational backgrounds such as teachers, journalists, and economists.

The interviews were semistructured. Informants were asked a series of open-ended questions on their perceptions, attitudes, and justifications of welfare conditionality in general and the amendment specifically. After transcription of the interview data, we conducted a thematic content analysis in which themes that could inform our research questions were identified, coded, and so clusters of categories were crystalized (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.1 | Methodological issues

Our study is based on interviews conducted shortly after the implementation of the amendment (only 6 months). This could mean that some of the managers we interviewed had rather few experiences in practicing behavioural conditionality, and thus, their responses could be based on misconceptions and other miscalculations. Future research should undertake similar data gatherings at later stages after the managers have gained more experience with the amendment.

Another methodological issue encumbered with our study is that we cannot be certain about the genuineness of the managers' testimonies in politically sensitive and inflected themes such as our interview queries. Indeed, in an interview situation, informants might desire to respond within socially desirable discourses. However, our research interest has not been to capture their own, genuine opinions in these regards but rather to deepen the understanding of how the managers choose to interpret and justify the policies in question publicly and internally within their organisation.

3.2 | Findings

The broad frontline managers' endorsement (86%) of the ethically controversial conditionality in a street-level organisation staffed with a large number of professional social workers seemed to be a counter-intuitive finding. Furthermore, the notion that only about half of the respondents believed conditionality is an efficient means of getting people into work intrigued us. Thus, the chief aim of the present study is to explore frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of the Norwegian behavioural conditionality.

3.3 | The perception of conditionality

In accordance with the survey findings, the managers were highly supportive of conditionality in general. One informant put it:

> We should have faith in people, we should have faith that people can behave appropriately, can achieve things and so we should make demands.

However, there were some differing viewpoints with regards to the necessity of the amendment of the Social Services Act. Whereas some embraced it as a long-awaited legislation, others believed it to be nothing but a minor, insignificant legislative adjustment. As a response to the question of necessity of the amendment one informant said:

> Yes, this change should have been made 100 years ago, for everybody of course. I identified this as an issue when I started out as a social worker. I thought to myself, what are we doing? We have to get people into work!

The new amendment was expected to result in more legitimacy for their practice of conditionality. The desired legitimising effect was aimed at several stakeholders, including the municipality authorities (for granting more financial resources for the implementation), claimants themselves, and actors in the health care services, such as psychologists.

Other managers claimed that the amendment was not necessary because they had already implemented mandatory activation for young social assistance claimants:

> This was not necessary because it is not a major change, we have just changed the wording from "can" to "shall." I believe that we have always had the opportunity to give people conditional cash transfers.

Despite some diversity in opinion regarding the necessity of the amendment, overall, our informants were supportive.

The Social Services Act does not specify the activity requirements imposed on social assistance recipients. Each municipality has been granted discretionary capacity to make decisions regarding what kinds of activities they want to establish. Frontline managers did prefer enabling-oriented "activity centres" and were resistant to reciprocal elements, such as work in exchange for social assistance. "Activity centres" were perceived as pedagogical arenas wherein the clients would receive assistance in job seeking, CV writing, training for job interviews, and general guidance resembling that of supported living and employment.

They opposed "workfare" due to assumed "lock in" effects, meaning that programme participation may crowd out ordinary job searching. Thus, most of the interviewed managers did not favour activity measures requiring claimants to execute specific work such as litter picking. For some managers, supportive attitudes towards conditionality applied only to the enabling-oriented nature of the activities:

> I believe that as long as we have activities and measures that emphasise that, if you join this, then it will make a difference and you will become more competent in escaping the situation you are in, then I think activation is positive.

Some of the managers said that the municipality had established an "activity centre" prior to the amendment of the act, whereas others aspired to doing so. These activity centres were arenas for assisted job searching, learning life skills, and practicing interpersonal interaction skills. Several of the managers' utterances, such as the one below, supported strong pedagogical elements in these arenas:

> There is a lot of guidance going on, but also training. Everybody can write a CV, but how does one approach an employer, how does one sell oneself, how does one dress? Should you have snuff under your lips when you ask for a job? Saggy pants, are they cool or not in these contexts?

Another manager said:

> ...sometimes we arrange courses in different subjects, such as personal finances or elections and political systems. I call it adult education for living. Courses on contemporary issues. Then they [clients and supervisors] gather and have lunch together regularly.

Lack of competency in general life skills seemed to be perceived as a common characteristic of most claimants. With this perception as a fundamental premise, it seems logical that it is the responsibility of the state to facilitate acquisition of these kinds of competencies. Even those who did not believe conditionality to be a particularly effective tool to integrate people into the labour market thought that these types of activities are expedient because many clients were perceived to need long-term assistance before a possible entry into the labour market. They perceived conditionality as benevolent added services and expressed positive attitudes towards conditionality also because it promotes a sense of belonging and affiliation for people. In sum, the data suggested a clear orientation towards what Sabatinelli calls a broad conceptualization of conditionality policies.

Both within and across focus groups, we detected some differing opinions regarding perceptions of the exemption rule, that is, who should not be subject to activity requirements.

Interviewer:

> What do you think are typical "weighty reasons" [for exemption]?

Informant:

> Major health issues, if you have challenging health issues that prevent you from attending activities.

Likewise, another frontline manager claimed:

> Some people don't have day care arrangements for their children, that is a weighty reason. And then there are drug issues, when people have drug issues, they don't have to attend activities.

However, some of the managers believed that activity requirements should apply to everyone:

> We have to apply this [activity requirements] to everyone. We just have to find the right measures, the right activity. That is exactly what we should do in order for these people [clients] to get on with their lives.

Overall, the managers' statements conveyed a client-sensitive orientation either in the form of extensive application of the exemption rule or as a pursuit towards differentiated, tailor-made, and individualised activity requirements.

With respect to sanctions, the managers claimed that they make extensive use of mitigation clauses and otherwise act rather cautiously when it comes to sanctioning, meaning that several aspects, both in the general situation of the claimant and the specific violation situation, are considered before a monetary reduction is implemented. The discretionary powers given to the frontline managers often benefit the claimants, that is, in cases of doubt the sanction will not be imposed. Some informants also claimed that the social assistance recipients are given several chances, and sometimes, the sanction will be reversed if the claimants are present at the activity centre the next day, implying extensive use of reparatory clauses. Furthermore, usually the reduction is a rather minimal and insignificant amount of money, as opposed to sanctioning practices in, for instance, the UK, where benefits can be removed indefinitely or for up to 3 years:

> We never take away people's rent, nor electricity and we don't reduce the benefit so that they don't have enough money for food.

One of the informants reported that she believed in a reversed arrangement, where those who participated in activities were granted an "encouragement salary" rather than having the benefit reduced in cases of non-participation. When asked whether they believe sanctioning might affect claimants' economic situation in an unfortunate or unreasonable manner, most informants expressed that the scope for discretion and the many mitigation clauses in the legislation allow them to eliminate such aspects:

> We make individual assessments in cases that we believe might be indefensible. Then we don't do that [impose sanction]. Then we decide that the claimant can keep the money.

As shown, the data suggested that sanctioning is perceived as an absolute last resort, and there seems to be extensive application of mitigation clauses and a relatively high threshold for sanctioning, suggesting a mild and client-sensitive orientation.

3.4 | Justifications of conditionality

The frontline managers perceive conditionality as an utterly fundamental human right and distance themselves from perspectives that emphasise possible unfortunate, disciplinary, and controlling/coercive aspects of conditionality:

> I believe we should make demands on people because they [conditional cash transfers] are simply a human right.

The frontline managers express that it is important to have expectations on clients and that conditionality policies are all about empowerment, caring, and having faith in people. Failure to "make demands" is perceived as tantamount to neglect:

> They [conditional cash transfers] are about having expectations on people, about giving people a chance to really show them that there are possibilities out there.

Many of the interviewed managers believed that by forcing clients into activities, they will discover new opportunities for work, networking and socialising with others, as well as developing a sense of belonging. Another said:

> I think it is about caring and respect for individuals by showing that we have faith that those people can master something. I don't like the idea of assuming that clients can't succeed. Therefore, making demands on people is about showing that you have respect and faith in them, that is what I think.

In addition, the activities were viewed as having positive effects for the claimants. Informants expressed convictions that participating in various activities is positive for one's health. Furthermore, because they believed isolation and loss of meaning were typical characteristics of young claimants (lack of social networks and gaming on their own throughout nights), the activities would then give claimants a sense of belonging to a social fellowship and, as such, be included in the community. The claimants would experience independence and a sense of achievement. Thus, activating the claimants would give them a boost, and the frontline workers would be able to help them in these arenas:

> Participating in activities is good for one's health, being a part of a social fellowship, to achieve things, to experience independence, that is good.

Some informants held that the claimants did not know what was in their own best interests and that they had been self-destructive in their choices throughout life. Thus, their own choices and autonomy could not be counted on. Hence, it is the responsibility of the organisation to make good choices for them (such as conditionality) and help them (in the activity arenas).

> They [clients] have just sunk down and down and then they are completely down, and finally they just don't care anymore. When we tell them that they are going to attend some activities and they will be a part of the community in one way or another, then we can lift them up.

Moreover, for some of the informants, activating the claimants was related to a universal respect for human beings. Having expectations and making demands on people were synonymous with believing in them and respecting them. As such, it would almost be an assault to avoid conditionality.

When asked whether there is a reciprocity rationale guiding the conditionality practices, one informant said:

> It's not like when you get cash, then you have to do something in return. We do this because we want to find the right help for people.

Other informants claimed that a "something in return" way of thinking often resulted in unfortunate "lock in" effects because clients were set to do community work for their cash benefits instead of focusing on (re)integration into the labour market. Furthermore, the managers did not believe that there are any cost-effectiveness ideas guiding their practices:

> The aim has not been to save the budget by scaring people away, it is rather about offering better services.

Another informant said:

> Financially, I don't have any expectations of spending more money on the activity requirements, nor do I have any expectations of saving money either. So I believe we have to manage the activity requirements cleverly so that we can create good services, not to scare people away from applying for benefits.

The informants were divided in the perception of the purpose and justification of sanctions. Some reported that sanctions were used to get in contact with the claimants when they neither participated in activities nor answered phone calls.

> When we can't get in touch with them at all, they don't show up, don't answer the phone, and not PM, then we assume that they will show up if we stop the money. We wonder whether they are even alive.

The purpose of the sanctions is to get in touch with the clients and force them into presenteeism. The local authorities cannot provide their services when clients are absent. Others perceived sanctions as a tool to teach the young claimants that an action (not participating in activities) leads to consequences (reduction of monetary benefits), clearly resembling a parental approach. As one informant said:

> This is a kind of upbringing. That is the most important reason.

Thus, rather than viewing sanctioning as a disciplinary tool, they were believed to operate as a pedagogical tool to shape the claimants' behaviour for their own interest.

Overall, frontline managers seemed convinced that the activities they impose on young social assistance recipients are in their best interest and perceived the activities as a pathway to a working life:

> Work is best for individuals and that is where we are going. We have a pronounced job-focus.

4 | DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of this qualitative study suggest that the managers embrace a caring and paternalistic justificatory narrative in defence of what they conceptualie as a broad conditionality, which they perceive as mild, benevolent, and client sensitive. In the following sections, we will offer some explanations for the strong normative support towards conditionality and the robust position of paternalistic justifications. In addition, we situate our findings by arguing that despite similarities with frontline responses from other Anglophone countries, the testimonies provided by our informants differ in some important aspects as a resonation of social democratic values.

4.1 | Broad perception of conditionality

At the very heart of it, conditionality is an exercise of power and social control, with elements of coercion and surveillance (Lukes, 2005; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Although the popular conception of the links between work/activity and physical/psychological well-being are rather uncontroversial, the element of coercion representing a core principle in conditionality policies might appear as somewhat contradictory to social work values. One could expect that these policies would "Cultivate a sense of struggle with the ethical dilemmas of enacting a professional

ethic of social justice or care alongside what they consider to be a policy that is unjust" (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2007).

However, our informants' perceptions of the mild and client-sensitive practical implementation might serve as one possible explanation of the overall normative support. Indeed, one might argue that conditionality is far less pro-vocative, controversial, and ethically troubling in the context of a human resource approach and is a relatively responsive treatment of clients. Whereas evidence regarding the poverty-inducing effects of sanctions are ample in the UK (Oakley, 2014; Reeve, 2017; Wright & Stewart, 2016); there are few reasons to assume comparable condi-tions in Norway. With reference to our findings, one might even wonder what the actual nature of coercion in the Norwegian conditionality is. We argue that the managers' testimony regarding extensive application of mitigation clauses substantially dampens elements of coercion in a way that profoundly distinguishes the Norwegian model from other Anglosphere countries such as the US and the UK. Indeed, conditionality is not one singular phenomenon (Eichhorst, Kaufmann & Konle-Seidl, 2008), and our results from the Norwegian context in comparison with those from, for instance, Portugal (Eleveld, 2017) and the UK (Wright & Stewart, 2016) represent yet another testimony of the same claim.

The perception of mildness of practical implementation is also related to the broad definition of conditionality we found our informants to adopt. When the purposes of conditionality are empowerment and overarching social inclusion, it is likely to affect implementation practices and vice versa. The amendment of the Social Services Act is not interpreted as a disciplinary device to control and punish the youth but rather as a pedagogical tool to help them into better lives, both with regards to labour market integration and also other forms of social inclusion, evidently in agreement with the holistic, social service orientation embedded in social work values. Thus, for some informants, the purposes of conditionality scopes far beyond a unilateral focus on labour market entry, serving as a possible explanation of the statistical gap, that is, 86% yielded normative support to conditionality, but only 54% believed it to be efficient with respect to labour market entry.

4.2 | Paternalistic justifications of conditionality

Based on the Nordic model with a long history of structural explanations of worklessness, rather than individual explanations (i.e., dependency culture), the managers in our study embrace compulsory activation in order to provide care and an arena for empowerment for their clients. Sanctions are not perceived as disciplinary or punitive. Rather, they are first and foremost considered tools for achieving client presenteeism. When clients are present (i.e., in the activation centres), they are available for social treatment. The idea of social treatment is central to the historical development of the Norwegian social assistance scheme. In his seminal comparative analysis of the development of social assistance in Norway and Britain, Lødemel (1997) argues that, as opposed to the British model, Norway has successfully integrated the two services of "cash and care." Our informants' enthusiasm towards conditionality could be understood in light of this historical notion. Conditionality policies aiming to force clients into activities provide the local authorities with better and additional tools to attend to their mandate and hence provide both income maintenance and social treatment.

The justificatory narratives offered by our informants do not occur in a social vacuum. They are likely to be influenced by broader institutional–cultural contextual features. Hence, policy implementation and justifications of these reflect the basic values of the society and display a valuation of certain ways of life (Bradshaw & Terum, 1997). Justifications, such as economic efficiency and reciprocity, and justice arguments rest upon stigmatising assumptions, such as moral hazard, and therefore do not resonate with the Norwegian egalitarian culture. It would furthermore "count as unacceptably humiliating in any context where there is broad public recognition of structural and non-volitional causes of unemployment" (Eriksen & Molander, 2018, p13). In contrast, caring and paternalistic justifica-tions of conditionality are well suited to Norwegian public discourse. In addition, the ostensible contradiction between the social work ideal of self-determination (Terum et al., 2012) and the apparent willingness of our

informants (most of them social work trained) to assume they know the client's best interest might also be explained by the perception of client sensitivity and the purpose of holistic social inclusion.

We argue that four initial assumptions form the basis for the paternalistic justifications found in our data. First, one must assume that the paternalist considers the supposed passivity and social exclusion as problematic for the individual herself. Internationally, objections to the traditional "passive" welfare state have been wide, ranging from problematic high levels of public expenditures (especially in times of austerity) and unjust policies, to problematic for the individual's overall well-being. The popular conception that work and activities are health promoting as opposed to the potentially harmful effects of passivity is a salient and prominent public discourse in Norway (Eriksen & Molander, 2018). Thus, the problem with the traditional, passive welfare state is primarily depicted as a quandary on the individual level, rather than a problem at a higher community level. The active welfare state then becomes a response to the individual problems generated by the passive welfare state.

Second, the paternalist assumes that the individual does not behave in ways that serve her own interests and thus finds herself in a "persistent misguidedness." She is either oblivious of her own best interests or lacks the motivation to act in pursuit of those interests. In other words, if left to their own devices, people will not make the "right choice" (Standing, 2011). As witnessed by the testimony of our informants, resonating with the findings of Eriksen and Molander (2018), the clients are indeed assumed to lack the awareness of the potential harmful effects of their own passivity and in addition will suffer from a weakness of will problem. Lack of motivation to be active and to work are linked with psychosocial deficits such as poor childhood conditions deprived of adequate socialisation and internalisation of social norms regarding valued ways of life. Rather than attributing out-of-work behaviour to moral hazard, clients are perceived as victims of circumstances.

Closely related to the first assumption, the third assumption is a notion resonating with what Mead calls the tuteluary state. The simple premise is that the state is more capable of deciding what is best for those targeted for conditionality. As the claimants are not considered to be competent self-regarding individuals acting in pursuit of their own interests, the state with its extended arms must provide support of several kinds on condition of restrictions on their lives. It is a state responsibility to assist marginalised groups of people to live their lives in accordance with valued ways of life, such as being active and participate in working life. This assumption further rests on the idea that welfare institutions are in possession of adequate means to help clients. It has been noted that the Nordic countries have traditionally tended to emphasise pedagogical measures such as education, rehabilitation, and treatment in order to strengthen social norms and certain values (Bradshaw & Terum, 1997).

Finally, paternalistic justifications are also based on an acceptance or even advocacy of the exercise of coercion, understood as deprivation of liberty of choice. At its very heart is the idea that the end justifies the means. The aforementioned lack of awareness and motivation is to be defeated by means of coercion. As we have shown, the element of coercion may vary substantially between national models of conditionality, and this notion might be the key to understanding the differences between Mead's paternalistic justifications and our informants within a Norwegian context. Although Mead and others (e.g., Dunn, 2014; Perkins, 2016) are prone to accepting harsh sanctions in order to coercively change people's behaviour, the Norwegian welfare state is characterised by careful consideration of poverty prevention, redistributive mechanisms, and liberal egalitarianism that dampen the elements of coercion. In other words, the paternalistic justifications offered by Mead is a defence of a qualitatively different conditionality regime than the one defended by our informants in the present study.

4.3 | Distinctively Norwegian/Nordic frontline responses

The findings of our research reveal several similarities with that of other studies. First of all, the overall positive normative attitudes towards welfare reform largely coincides with studies of frontline responses from a wide range of OECD countries (Caswell & Høybye, 2015; Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010; Austin, Johnson, Chow, Marco & Ketch, 2009; Handler, 2004; Soss et al., 2011). In alignment with other studies, in so far, managers express normative

reservations around welfare reform policy, they are attributed to the repertoire and appropriateness of the activity measures and options, rather than the coercive and potentially harmful nature of welfare conditionality.

In effect, the disciplinary and punitive nature of these policies, albeit to varying degrees depending on the institutional context, are seldom acknowledged by frontline workers and managers. Instead, as demonstrated by our findings as well as other research, frontline staff discursively reframe conditionality by articulating more positively laden terms such as possibilities, help, and care, and as such discard the notion of welfare conditionality being disciplinary and punitive towards marginalised groups of people.

Moreover, in justifying conditionality and sanctioning regimes, frontline staff both in our study as well as other studies predominantly lend support to paternalistic reasoning, thus echoing public justificatory stories articulated by policy documents and politicians responsible for policy reforms. It is indeed the "clients best interests," which dominates staff testimonies in frontline response studies.

Despite the many similarities between our findings and that of other researcher's predominantly within Anglosphere countries, several notable differences appeared.

First, as our study is undertaken in a context where sanctions are shallow in terms of duration and scope, the policy being justified by our informants represents quite a different legal and institutional sanctioning regime. As our review of the legal foundations of the Norwegian social assistance scheme and the testimony of our interviewees reveal, full sanctions are neither legal nor practiced, clearly reassembling a system of universal, nonconditional basic income. Rather, only marginal fractions of the monetary benefits are reduced in cases of noncompliance. Furthermore, given the many mitigation clauses and the extensive usage of them as part of the wide discretionary room in the frontlines, far from all cases of noncompliance is even sanctioned. Thus, the sanctioning regime in our study differs substantially from that of other regimes of full family sanctions, making the justificatory comparisons between our findings and those undertaken in for instance an American context somewhat challenging. Justifying the removal of support to people's basic needs is something quite different than embracing the shallow sanctions in the Norwegian social assistance scheme. Whereas the Anglosphere sanctioning regimes appear rather coercive in terms of limiting client's liberty of choice, the Norwegian social assistance sanctioning regime operates on a more regulatory level, never leaving clients on bare grounds, and in effect less liberty restrictive.

Second, as studies of frontline responses in the United States (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010) and other Western European countries show (Handler, 2004), workers adhere to multiple justifications for welfare conditionality beyond the mere paternalistic reasoning of the client's best interest. Indeed, reasons such as caseload reduction, fraud reduction, deterrence, and fair bargain in return for assistance are all stated rationales for welfare conditionality revealed in studies of workers and managers. In contrast, we did not find these pluralistic rationales in our study. Rather, our informants relied virtually exclusively on paternalistic justifications of welfare conditionality. Even in the face of explicit interview queries regarding caseload reduction, financial savings, and fairness/mutuality arguments, the informants rejected these rationales and maintained their paternalistic testimonies.

Finally, as paternalistic arguments can be framed differently, the articulations found in our study somewhat deviate from those studies undertaken in neoliberal contexts such as the American (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010; Lens, 2008; Soss et al., 2011). Indeed, the client's best interest can be understood in quite different manners. Whereas in the American studies reviewed in this article, workers and manager's conceptions of the client's interests reflect the neoliberal values such as individual responsibility, self-discipline, choice, and accountability; in our study, informants emphasise other aspects of client's interest such as health promotion, being a part of a social fellowship and human rights, as a reflection of the social democratic values of egalitarianism, equality, and active citizenry.

Intertwined with being fundamentally rooted in a long tradition of social democratic values, the Norwegian welfare context has long been dominated by social work professional norms valorising a social service orientation in sharp contrast to neoliberal values and thus serving as a possible explanation for the differences in paternalistic framing found in our study and American studies.

Taken together, our findings of the frontline responses revealing a broad definition of conditionality and the specific forms of paternalistic reasoning provide new additions to the justificatory defences previously acknowledged in the conditionality literature. More specifically, the article presents a case for Norwegian exceptionalism in the management of welfare conditionality and as such demonstrates just how deeply embedded paternalism has been in social democratic thinking.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Frontline managers in 108 municipalities, a random sample of Norway's 428 municipalities, were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the following statement: "Conditions, activity requirements, and sanctions should be central tools in NLWA." On a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), 86% of the respondents selected values 4 or 5, thus agreeing with the statement.

[2] On the same Likert scale as above, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statement: "Conditions, activity requirements, and sanctions are effective measures to bring people into work." 54% selected values 4 or 5, thus agreeing with the statement.

[3] Our survey data revealed that 45% of the managers reported having face-to-face interaction with clients when performing activation work. This is especially the case for managers in the smaller offices (fewer than 20 employees).

[4] Paternalism may refer to both a kind of policy approach (e.g., neoliberal paternalism) and to a kind of justification for a given policy (Mestan, 2014, p. 6). In this article, we use the concept referring to the latter, as a justification of welfare conditionality.

[5] Our unpublished survey reveals that the share of trained social workers amongst the municipal local managers is 52%, whereas the share of trained social workers amongst municipal street-level bureaucrats is 62.1%.

[6] The project, Between Income Maintenance and Activation: The legitimacy, implementation and outcomes of social security policies (TREfF2), was made possible by grants from the Norwegian Research Council (Welfare, Working Life and Migration program).

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Article 2

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Article 3

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Article 4

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Frontline Workers' dedication in an activation work context

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Abstract

Dedication to work is an important issue, due to its influence on work performance. Based on survey data of 1347 frontline workers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, this article examines dedication to work in an activation work context. By using the job-demand-control-support model, we examined the relationship between perceived job characteristics and dedication. Further, we compared the social workers' level of dedication with other workers. Also, attitudes towards activation policies were included in the analysis in order to investigate the relative influence of these attitudes on dedication. Results revealed rather high levels of dedication among workers. While perceptions of demand were negatively associated with dedication, attitudes towards activation policies and perceptions of control and support yielded positive relationships with the latter two as the most salient predictors of workers' dedication. Differences with regards to level and predictors of dedication between educational groups were rather minor and insignificant.

Keywords: activation; frontline; dedication; work engagement, social work; Job Demand-Control-Support model, attitudes

Introduction

Frontline workers play a key role in the implementation of public policy (Lipsky, 2010), including activation policy, which in this paper is understood as ongoing activity requirements for benefit receipt. Activation work in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), being the context of the present study, can be understood as the implementation of activation policies. Activation work and particularly the social workers' approach to activation, is to a limited extent understood (Van Berkel & Van der Aa 2012). The attention in this article is on frontline workers' dedication to activation work. Dedication is important because it expresses the frontline workers enthusiasm in relation to one's work, which influences the quality of work performance (Maslach et al., 2001) and learning motivation (Bakker et al., 2012). In other words, it is plausible to assume that dedicated frontline workers provide better client services.

With an increasing reliance on private contract agencies, workers deliver activation services both in private provider agencies and in the public sector (Schram, 2012). This paper concentrates on the latter group of workers. The recent restructuring of human service organisations, including the activation work context, into more lean organisations have made these workplaces highly stressful for human service professionals (Astvik et al., 2014). Excessive workloads, insufficient resources, role conflicts etc. make workers in these organisations especially vulnerable to job stress, burnout and other negative work outcomes (Coffey et al., 2009). Whereas burnout among human service workers have garnered ample research attention, less focus has been devoted to the concept of work dedication. The overarching aim of this study is to determine the relative influence of perceived job characteristics and individual characteristics, including educational backgrounds and attitudes towards activation policies, on workers' dedication in an activation work context.

Dedication tends to develop in the social context of the workplace (Leiter and Bakker 2010). Therefore, by using the Job Demand-Control-Support model (JDCS), we explore the relationships between perceived job demands, control and social support on the one hand, and dedication on the other. Despite being well documented findings (Bakker et al. 2007; Prieto et al., 2008), these associations are not previously explored in an activation work context. Thus, in this study, we attempt to fill this

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knowledge gap by shedding light on the issue of dedication and it's predictors among activation workers.

As activation work is carried out by workers with diverse educational backgrounds (van Berkel & Knies, 2018), a recurrent issue in the literature has been concerned with the impact of educational background on workers' attitudes, orientations and practices (van Berkel, 2017). However, the examination of whether there are differences among the various educational groups in their level of dedication represents a novel contribution to the literature. The question is whether different educational programmes are likely to foster varying degrees of dedication to the specific context of activation work.

With a focus on social workers, representing the largest and presumably the most relevant educational background to this specific work context, we compare social workers' level of dedication to employees with other educational backgrounds (health care workers, social scientists and finance/business admistration/law), and those without attained higher education (lower education). In doing so, we take into account both type of professional training and level of attained higher education. Relatedly, attitudes towards activation policies, presumably shaped partly through socialisation processes in the educational setting, might influence workers' level of dedication and is therefore included in the analysis.

Furthermore, in order to provide a nuanced picture of the relationship between JDCS and dedication, we conduct separate analyses for each educational group to detect similarities and differences with respect to predictors of dedication.

Dedication

Previous research indicates that work engagement relates positively to professional commitment (Hakanen et al., 2006; Halbesleben 2010; Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006), job and task performance (Demerouti and Cropanzano 2010; Maslach et al., 2001), active learning (Bakker et al., 2012), and negatively to turnover intentions (Halbesleben 2010; Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006). Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by *dedication*, *vigour*, and *absorption* (Schaufeli et al. 2002). Dedication refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, pride, and challenge in relation to one's work. Vigour is the energy and mental resilience used while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work,

and persistence in the face of difficulties. Absorption is recognized as a state of being fully and happily concentrated in work, in which time passes quickly and it is difficult to detach oneself from the tasks at hand.

This study focuses solely on *dedication* because a better understanding of this dimension of work engagement is especially relevant for predicting stronger professional commitment (Halbesleben 2010). In fact, among the three concepts of work engagement, dedication has been found to be the strongest predictor of various work outcomes (Adekola, 2011). In the current study, dedication is understood as a motivational concept that contribute to frontline workers behaviour because it reflects employees' genuine willingness to invest effort to attain organisational goals or success (Albrecht 2010; Leiter and Bakker 2010). In more detail, engaged frontline workers tend to give more of themselves at work because of the work-related well-being, which, in practical terms, have direct consequences for how they carry out or deal with work tasks. Frontline workers in a state of work engagement turn dedication into more effective action that result in improved job and task performance (Demerouti and Cropanzano 2010; Maslach et al., 2001). In other words, engaged frontline workers invest more of themselves at work in order to fulfil significant work tasks of their organisation.

Job demand-control-support model
Perceived job characteristics have been found to have a profound impact on numerous employee well-being parameters, including dedication (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Models most frequently utilized in this strand of research is the job demand-control (JDC) (Karasek, 1979) and it's expanded version job demand-control-support (JDCS) (Johnson et al., 1989) aiming to explain the occurrence of mental strain and well being in a workplace context.

Job demands
Job demands are most typically operationalized as work load and time pressure (Karasek, 1989). Previous research has not fully established how such demands relate to dedication, either theoretically or empirically (Mauno et al. 2010; Spreitzer et al., 2010), and especially among social workers. Several studies, however, indicate that workload can yield serious consequences like stress and burnout, which in turn might decrease worker dedication (González-Romá et al. 2006; Maslach et al., 2001;

Schaufeli and Bakker 2010; Schaufeli and Taris 2005). These assumptions are supported by the meta-analyses of Christian and Slaughter (2007) and Halbesleben (2010), where workload is found to relate negatively to dedication. Prieto et al. (2008) reported similar results. Empirical knowledge therefore seems to indicate that heavy workload contributes negatively to dedication and positively to moral distress and burnout.

Within the specific context of activation work, the deteriorating effects of heavy workloads have received some attention (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016; Minas, 2006; Lee, 2009). For example, in a Dutch study, high workloads were found to negatively influence workers' performance in the sense of supporting clients into the labour market (van Berkel & Knies, 2016). Similarly, in an American context, Jewell and glaser (2006) found that high workloads were negatively associated with service quality. Although valuable contributions, these studies were not based on the JDCS model and thus the potential buffering effects of job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) have not been taken into account.

Control

Control is defined as having substantial freedom, independence, and discretion in scheduling one's work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out (Hackman and Oldham 1975; Spector 1986). In a meta-study, Mauno et al. (2010) found that autonomy contributes to dedication. It has been noted that social workers tend to put greater emphasis on having autonomy at work, compared to employees without professional education (Newell et al. 2009). This is in line with theories of professions, which make autonomy to a crucial characteristic of a profession (Freidson 2001). Previous studies could lead to the assumption that an experience of limited autonomy would affect the social workers' dedication.

A crucial question seems be how activation policies affect the perception of autonomy and discretionary space (van Berkel & Knies 2016). In a Norwegian survey, frontline workers in NAV generally reports of high degree of autonomy. However, the probability of reporting of decreased autonomy the last years was slightly higher among social workers (Jessen & Tufte 2014). To the best of our knowledge, few studies have examined the relation between autonomy and dedication for frontline workers in the context of activation work.

Social support

Dedication tends to develop through a network of colleagues and supervisors (Bakker et al., 2009). The social context renders it possible to form relationships that can hold valuable resources pertaining to the experience of dedication. These relationships can then evolve into so-called helping relationships, also labelled social support, (Leavy 1983), referring both to support from colleagues and supervisors.

In a meta-study, Mauno et al. (2010) found that social support seems to contribute to dedication. This result is supported by studies conducted on social workers. A qualitative study by Astvik et al. (2014) shows that social support is one of the most important predictors of engagement. Previous research also indicates that social workers who receive minimal support from colleagues and/or superiors are more likely than others to leave their organization (Harter and Blacksmith 2010; Kim and Stoner 2008; Nissly et al., 2005). In addition, Sánchez-Moreno et al. (2015) found that social support relates negatively to stress among social workers. In all, research indicates that social support contributes to dedication.

Although previous studies have provided robust support to the links between demand, control and support, and dedication to work, there is little knowledge about these issues in the context of activation work and whether there are inter-professional differences with respect to predictors of dedication. In the study at hand, with a special focus on social workers, we investigate whether and how the links between job characteristics and dedication differ across educational groups.

The role of education and attitudes on dedication

Activation work is closely connected to activation policy, which is a common trend in OECD-countries aiming to move non-working people into employment. However, activation policies differ between countries in the balance between demanding and enabling measures (Eichhorst, Kaufman & Konle-Seidl 2008, Lødemel & Moreira 2014). In addition, the balance between benefit administration and social service provision differ, although increasing emphasis on conditionality and sanctions contribute to connect "cash and care". Recipients are increasingly being expected to meet different kinds of activity requirements, and when these conditions are not being met, different kinds of sanctions could be imposed (Watts & Fizpatrick 2018).

In the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, frontline workers are expected to deliver professional services, as well as benefit administration. The activation strategy in Norway is assumed to be relatively enabling oriented, although demanding elements are also included. Further, the sanctioning regime in Norway is considered to be relatively mild (Eleveld, 2017) in addition to the existence of and extensive use of mitigation clauses (Sadeghi & Terum, 2020). Nevertheless, activation policies have evolved to become defining characteristics of the labour and welfare organisations and frontline workers are expected to implement these salient policy reforms and carry out disciplinary and sanctioning practices.

Activation work is carried out by workers with differing educational backgrounds (van Berkel, 2017) and thereby give rise to questions regarding whether educational background matters for issues related to practice. In some countries, like for instance the Scandinavian, social workers form a significant proportion of the frontline workers in activation programmes (Miller & Austin 2006). Different from for instance the UK, social workers have always been strongly involved in the implementation of social assistance in Norway, both as service providers and benefit administrators (Lødemel 1997). Implicit in the scholarly debate on educational backgrounds of activation workers is the view that the social work education is the most relevant education for this specific work context. Nevertheless, potential tensions between social work ethos and the ideology and governance patterns underpinning activation work have caught scholars attention over the last decades.

According to Caswell and Larsen (2017), the shift from passive welfare approach to a more active approach seems to fit well with the social work tradition aiming to contribute to changes on the individual level in alignment with people-changing technologies. However, the social disciplining aspects of activation, such as sanctioning practices could be argued to conflict with social work values and their views of clients. For example, some research have indicated a tension between the mandatory elements in activation work and the social work ethic (Hasenfeld 1999, van Berkel & van der Aa 2012, Nothdurfter 2016). Does this mean that social workers, due to their presumably less positive attitudes towards activation policies, are less dedicated to activation work than their colleagues are? And if so, which educational group(s) are they different from? Comparing social workers to other professional groups in studies of burnout and work engagement is not novel (e.g. Schaufeli et al., 2006; Nerstad et al., 2010). However, most of these studies are

undertaken across various work contexts, making it challenging to isolate a possible effect of educational background. The seemingly broad recruitment of frontline workers in the Norwegian NAV allows us to compare workers with different educational backgrounds within the same work context.

Notwithstanding the possible tensions between social work and activation work leading to the expectation of lower dedication among social workers, the opposite anticipation is also plausible. Being a related concept to dedication, especially when studied in a social welfare organisation, research on public service motivation (PSM), defined as "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organisations (Perry & Wise, 1990, 368) has provided insights into the effects of higher education, both in terms of level and type (Kjeldsen, 2012).

Due to the "key socializing role education plays in shaping individual beliefs" (Pandey & Stazyk, 2008, 103), higher education has been found to have a positive effect on PSM, although in varying degrees depending on type of educational background (Andersen & Pedersen, 2012; Vandenabeele, 2011; Edwards et al., 1981). For example, in a study of institutional antecedents of PSM among national civil servants, individuals with degrees in subjects typical for public servants like health care and social science expressed higher levels of PSM than employees with education within business and law (Vandenabeele, 2011).

Based on these findings, and insofar PSM and dedication to work in an activation work context are interrelated concepts, one could expect social workers to be more dedicated to their work than those with lower education and also those with degrees in business administration and law. Being a helping profession aimed at jobs with delivery of core public services, the elements of care and assistance towards marginalised groups of people are salient in the social work education, which in turn might inspire and encourage students of social work for efforts and dedication to work in NAV to a higher extent than some of the other educational backgrounds.

It is often assumed that education, both in terms of length and type (field of study) shape individuals values and attitudes through processes of socialisation. It is argued here that in the specific context of activation work, workers' attitudes towards the dominating activation policy might influence their dedication to work. As activation work is carried out by workers with varying educational backgrounds, it is plausible to assumed that they have differentiated attitudes towards activation policy.

Thus, whether workers are supporting of the demanding and sanctioning aspects of activation policies, might influence their dedication to work.

Within the tradition of interactional psychology, the notion of people being differentially compatible with jobs is almost axiomatic. Various types of person-environment fit indices have garnered attention and been found to predict work engagement, job satisfaction, as well as other well-being measures (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). For example, research on person-organisation fit, addressing the compatibility between people and organisations suggest that individuals will be most successful in organisations that share their values (value congruence) and goals (goal congruence) (Witt & Nye, 1992). Another related concept is that of person-job fit referring, among others, to whether employees' needs, desires or preferences are met by the jobs that they perform.

In a similar vein, however on a more specific level, we propose that, an attitude fit, meaning whether the individual frontline worker share the ethical principles and practical implications underpinning activation policies or not can possibly impact her/his dedication to activation work. A gap between workers and the organisations attitudes, values and normative judgements might induce moral distress, occurring when workers act in a manner contrary to their personal and professional values (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016).

Methodology

Sample

The present study was designed as a cross-sectional study of frontline workers in NAV in 2015. A total of 1,735 employees (64% response rate) from 113 different NAV offices participated in the web-based survey of their educational background, perceptions of job characteristics, as well as other demographic factors. However, this study only includes a sample who gave a response for all of the items of interest, which reduces the number of participants to 1,347. It is vital to note that the sample of 1347 does not differ from the 388 employees not included in the study with regard to factors such as gender, age, and educational background.

With respect to gender, the sample was heavily skewed, consisting of 1104 women (82%) and 243 men (18%), ranging from 23 to 70 years of age. This gender

skewness is however a reflection of realities in the sector being profoundly female-dominated.

Measurements

Dedication is measured using items from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova 2006). The items are: 'I am enthusiastic about my job', 'my job inspires me', and 'I am proud of the work I do'. The items are scored on a scale of zero to six, with six being 'strongly dedicated' ($\alpha = 0.9$).

Job demands, control and support

Job demands, control and support was measured using the Swedish Demand-Control-Support Questionnaire (DCSQ) (Sanne et al. 2005). The two items used to measure job demands were: 'I have sufficient time for all my work tasks' and 'The effort required to do my work is too great'. The items are scored on a scale of zero to three, with three representing 'heavy job demands' ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Control is measured using the following two items: 'I do not have the possibility to decide how to carry out my work', and "I have the possibility to decide for myself what should be done in my work". The items are scored on a scale of zero to three, with three representing 'high control'. Reliability estimated by Cronbach's alpha was not satisfactory for this scale, which is rather common for scales with few items. It is thus more appropriate to report the inter-item correlation, which was satisfactory ($r = 0.39$ p<0.001). According to Briggs and Cheek (1986) the inter item correlation for short scales should be above 0.2.

Social support was measured using the following items from Notelaers et al. (2007): 'If necessary, I can ask my colleagues for help' and 'If necessary, I can ask my direct supervisor for help'. These items are scored on a scale of zero to three, with three representing 'high support'. The correlation between the items were satisfactory ($r = 0.50$ p<0.001).

Educational background

Educational background was measured by first asking respondents to report their highest attained education. A dichotomous measure was used, classifying respondents

as higher educated (holding bachelor's or master's degree) in one group and lower educated (upper secondary as highest attained education) in the other group.

In addition, higher educated respondents were asked to identify their field of study among a range of different backgrounds, including social work, health care, social sciences, and finance/business/administration/law.

Attitude fit: Attitudes towards activation policies

Attitudes towards activation policies were measured by two items ('Demands and sanctioning and so on should be central activation measures for NAV' and 'Conditions and sanctions and so on are effective means of getting people into work'), measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). These two items were highly correlated ($r = 0.60$ $p<0.01$).

Control variables

This study uses age and gender as control variables. The variables are coded as follows: Age; continuous, Gender; woman = 0, men = 1.

Limitations

Because of its cross-sectional design, this study is subject to some methodological limitations, especially regarding causality assessment. Moreover, competing explanations cannot be excluded, nor can the possibility of gain spirals. Gain spirals are defined as amplifying loops in which cyclic relationships among constructs build on each other positively over time (Lindsley, Brass, and Thomas 1995). For instance, there is evidence that indicates that job resources and dedication mutually reinforce each other over time (Salanova et al. 2010).

Results

As shown in table 1 (see first column for whole sample), the level of dedication among frontline activation workers is rather high (M=4,9; SD=1,09). The same table also displays values for perceptions of demands (M=1,76; SD=0,68), control (M=2,01; SD=0,55), support (M=2,29; SD=0,56) and attitudes towards conditionality (M=2,78; SD=0,84). We conducted post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test which indicated that the mean score for social workers' attitudes towards activation

policies (M = 2,67, SD = 0,86) differed significantly from those with lower education (M = 2,84, SD = 0,81). With respect to perceptions of support, social workers' mean score (M = 2,37, SD = 0,55) differed from workers with social science education (M = 2,21, SD = 0,63) and workers with lower education (M = 2,23, SD = 0,54). Despite reaching statistical significance, the differences in mean scores between groups were quite small.

Table 1 *Means and standard deviations for major study variables for whole sample and across educational groups.*

Variable (scale)	Whole sample	Social work	Health care	Social sciences	Finance/ adm/law	Lower educated
Dedication (range=0-6; 0=low dedication)	4,9 (1,09)	4,82 (1,1)	4,94 (1,0)	4,71 (1,1)	4,8 (1,3)	5,08 (1,0)
Demand (range=0-3; 0=low demands)	1,76 (0,68)	1,75 (0,69)	1,80 (0,72)	1,86 (0,69)	1,78 (0,71)	1,75 (0,62)
Control (range=0-3; 0=low control)	2,01 (0,55)	2,05 (0,53)	2,04 (0,44)	1,96 (0,57)	2,04 (0,55)	1,96 (0,58)
Support (range=0-3; 0=low support)	2,29 (0,56)	2,37 (0,55)	2,34 (0,52)	2,21 (0,63)	2,27 (0,53)	2,23 (0,54)
Attitudes towards activation (range=0-4 0=negative towards activation)	2,78 (0,84)	2,67 (0,86)	2,73 (0,82)	2,85 (0,88)	2,89 (0,78)	2,84 (0,81)

Note. Standard deviations in parenthesis.

In order to test associations between demand, control, support, attitude fit and dedication (when controlled for age and gender), a linear hierarchical regression analysis was conducted as shown in table 2 (see final column in table 2, model 3). The results yielded significant relationships between all independent variables and dedication for the whole sample. Further, the analysis revealed that while the most important predictor for frontline workers' dedication is the perception of support at work (β = .244, p < .001), the least powerful predictor is the perception of demands (β = .094, p < .001), demonstrating that dedication is less influenced by workers'

Table 2 OLS regression for whole sample and sub groups with dedication as dependant variable. Standardised coefficients.
Note. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

		Social work	Health care[1]	Social sciences	Finance/ administration/ law	Lower education	Whole sample
Model 1	Attitude match	.119**	-.036	.244**	.106	.219***	.178***
	Adjusted R^2	.012	.013	.054	.004	.045	.031
Model 2	Attitude match	.067	-.086	.211**	.083	.213***	.149***
	Demand	-.163***	-.147	-.119	.011	-.087	-.105***
	Control	.172***	.331**	.165*	.286***	.235***	.191***
	Support	.228***	.326**	-.153*	.273**	.160**	.210**
	Adjusted R^2	.153	.243	.128	.174	.153	.154
Model 3	Attitude match	.076	-.119	.247**	.059	.211***	.149***
	Demand	-.148**	-.132	-.143*	-.010	-.085	-.094***
	Control	.170***	.302**	.189**	.258**	.232***	.188***
	Support	.246***	.336**	.190*	.268**	.171**	.240***
	Gender	-.051	-.168	-.193**	-.159*	.003	-.077**
	Age	.146**	-.003	.144	.193*	.037	.168***
	Adjusted r^2	.172	.249	.165	.217	.149	.183
	N	516	77	195	154	405	1347

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[1] Those with education within health care are few (n=77) and constitute a small portion of the whole sample. Therefore, one should consider results obtained for this group with caution.

perception of high workloads. Attitude fit displayed a relatively robust positive relationship with dedication, meaning that those highly supportive of activation policies were more dedicated to their work. Also gender and age predicted level of dedication, with the latter displaying higher predictive power. Women (β = -.077, $p <$ .01) and older workers (β = .168, $p <$ .001) were more dedicated than men and younger workers.

Table two here

A one-way ANCOVA was conducted to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between the five educational groups on level of dedication when controlled for age, gender, demand, control, support and attitude fit (see table 3). By and large, the analysis revealed mostly similarities between the various groups. However, despite similarities, some differences were detected, even after controlling for all other study variables. Those with lower education had the highest score of dedication (M_{adj} = 5.0; SE = 0.1), whereas workers with education within social sciences reported the lowest scores (M_{adj} = 4.81; SE = 0.1). The differences are minor, and thus the overall analysis showed no significant effect of educational type on level of dedication after controlling for study variables, $F(4, 1212) = 1.58$, $p = 0.18$, partial eta squared = 0.005. However, multiple pairwise comparisons showed significant differences between lower education (adjusted mean = 5.0) and social workers (adjusted mean = 4.83), and lower education and social scientists (adjusted mean = 4.81), suggesting that the few and minor differences found between the groups in this study are probably attributable to educational level, rather than type of education.

Subgroup analysis (see table 2) of the associations between study variables revealed both similarities and differences between the five groups in comparison. For all groups, perceptions of control and support had impact on their dedication, indicating the relative importance of these job characteristics. With respect to the perception of demands, only sub group analysis for social workers (β = -.148, $p <$ .01) and workers with education within social sciences (β = .143, $p <$ .05) showed significant relationships with dedication, suggesting that work dedication for the other groups do not depend on their perceptions of demands at work. Attitude fit with relation to activation policies were related to dedication only for those with education within social sciences (β = .247, $p <$ .01) and those with lower education (β = .211, p

< .001). Interestingly, this association was not significant for social workers (β = .076, $p > .05$), when controlled for job characteristics (see table 2, model 2). Although non-significant, for those with education within health care (β = -.119, $p > .05$) the relationship was negative.

The demographic variables were significantly associated with dedication for some of the groups, but not all. Women with education within social sciences (β = -.193, $p < .01$) and finance/administration/law (β = -.159, $p < .05$) were more dedicated than men, whereas gender did not influence dedication for the rest of the groups. Older workers with education within social work (β = .146, $p < .01$) and finance/administration/law (β = .193, $p < .05$) displayed higher dedication, but age did not impact dedication for the other groups.

Table 3 *Level of dedication: multiple pairwise comparisons of educational groups*

	Social workers	Healt care	Social sciences	Finance/adm. /law
Social work (n=516) (M=4.82; SD=1.1) (M_{adj}=4.83; SE=0.1)	-	-	-	-
Health care (n=77) (M=4.94; SD=1.0) (M_{adj}=4.93; SE=0.2)	M_{diff} = 0.10^{ns} $p = 0.41$	-	-	-
Social sciences (n=195) (M=4.71; SD=1.1) (M_{adj}=4.81; SE=0.1)	M_{diff} = 0,02^{ns} $p = 0.86$	M_{diff} = 0,12^{ns} $p = 0.39$	-	-
Finance/adm/law (n=154) (M=4.8; SD=1.3) (M_{adj}=4.84; SE=0.1)	M_{diff} = 0,01^{ns} $p = 0.88$	M_{diff} = 0,01^{ns} $p = 0.53$	M_{diff} = 0,03^{ns} $p = 0.79$	-
Lower education (n=405) (M=5.08; SD=1.0) (M_{adj}=5.00; SE=0.1))	M_{diff} = 0,18* $p = 0.03$	M_{diff} = 0,07^{ns} $p = 0.59$	M_{diff} = 0,19* $p = 0.04$	M_{diff} = 0,16^{ns} $p = 0.12$

Note. M mean, SD standard deviation, M_{adj} adjusted mean, SE standard error, M_{diff} adjusted mean difference;
* statistically significant difference (*p < 0.05*); ^{ns} statistically non-significant difference (*p > 0.05*).
Control variables included age, gender, demand, control, support and attitude fit.

Overall, the two analyses (ANCOVA and OLS regression) give reason to suggest that whereas educational background do not substantially impact on workers' dedication, job characteristics and attitude fit are indeed relatively powerful predictors for dedication. Although the various educational groups do not differ considerably in their level of dedication, our study provides evidence for some differences between the groups with respect to predictors of their dedication to work in an activation work context.

Discussion

High levels of dedication in an activation work context

In this study, the overall picture is that frontline workers, regardless of educational background, express high levels of dedication to activation work. On the face of it, this uplifting finding seemed somewhat unexpected, given the stressful nature of work in human service organisations and the helping professions (Astvik et al., 2014). Indeed, human service organisations and social work have been considered high-stress occupations (Baldschun et al., 2019), and is an internationally recognised problem (LIoyd et al., 2002). Consequently, much scholarly attention regarding these occupations have focused on burnout, rather than work engagement in general and dedication specifically. The relatively high rates of dedication reported in this study are inextricably linked to perceptions of job demands, control and support, which are well documented relationships (Bakker et al, 2007; Hakanen et al., 2006; Hakanen & Roodt, 2010; Halsbesleden, 2010; Mauno et al., 2010; Christian & Slaughter, 2007; Prieto et al., 2008).

The frontline workers in our study reported of high job demands, but even higher perceptions of control and support. These findings might be understood in light of the buffer hypothesis (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), postulating that high job control and support attenuate the negative impact of job demands on dedication. Thus, the detrimental effects of heavy workloads previously suggested in relation to activation work contexts (van Berkel & Knies, 2016; Jewell & Glaser, 2006; Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016) are not reflected in our study when job resources in accordance with the JDCS model are taken into account.

Although activation work has been associated with increased emphasis on efficiency, single purpose and hierarchical control, one can assume that these changes in public governance are less salient in the Norwegian type of activation work organisations. Indeed, the legal and institutional frameworks of the Norwegian activation work differ with respect to several aspects from other countries. For example, despite continuous legislative reforms aiming to increase sanctioning of welfare recipients, large discretionary powers are still

granted the frontline workers, thus contributing to the perception of high job control. Further, the frontline workers discretionary room reaches far beyond sanctioning practices. Also regarding decisions of activity requirements (decision authority) and communication methods (skill discretion), the workers are assumed to be capable of controlling their tasks and general work activities.

In our study, the one job resource found to be strongest associated with dedication was that of social support. Comprising of both colleague support and supervisor support, this resource has been assumed to play a crucial role particularly in human service organisations. Indeed, some research has also demonstrated the positive impacts of social support on workers in the specific context of activation work (e.g. Sadeghi, 2019). Frontline workers in our study reported of high levels of perceived social support. We believe the explanation of this finding to a great extent lies in the Norwegian model of labour relations characterised by equality, small power gaps between workers and managers and supportive communication techniques (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010). According to Hofstede (1980), Norwegian workplaces constitute one of the best work environments in the world, primarily due to the focus on employee participation, influence and workplace supportive culture. These claims are also supported by more recent observations (Schramm-Nielsen et al., 2004; Bergene & Hansen, 2016).

Job characteristics are more important than type of education for workers' dedication

Whereas job characteristics yielded relatively robust predictive power on dedication, type of education did not. That is, social workers did not differ significantly from the other educational groups in their level of dedication. This outcome indicates that compared to the educational setting, the workplace is a more important socialising arena in which workers dedication is established and developed. The majority of previous studies finding differences in either work engagement or burnout between various professional groups (Chiron et al., 2010; Olley, 2003; de Heus & Diekstra, 1999; Fiabane et al., 2013) have studied these professionals in different work settings. In our study, finding no significant differences between educational groups, we have held the work setting constant by studying the different groups in the same workplace. This suggests that it is the effect of work characteristics accounting for the different levels of for instance dedication among the various educational groups.

Contrary to our expectations based on previous studies, frontline workers with lower education expressed slightly, however significantly higher levels of dedication than trained

social workers. This finding seemed somewhat surprising due to the fact that most studies find a positive connection between level of attained education and dedication (Fiabane et al., 2013; Lawrence, 2011; Olley, 2003). Nevertheless, there are also examples of studies finding the opposite (Maslach et al., 2001). An explanation for our finding that higher education predicts lower dedication could be that more highly educated workers have higher expectations for their jobs, and are thus more distressed if these expectations are not realised.

Predictors of dedication: Differences between educational groups
Although our analysis for the whole group of frontline workers in the specific context of activation work did support the demand-control-support model, some variances between the educational categories was revealed. Whereas the positive associations between control and support on the one hand and dedication to work on the other were approximately the same across the educational categories, the perceptions of demands had differing effect on dedication depending on educational category. For social workers and those educated within social sciences, the perception of demands appeared as an important predictor for dedication. This was not the case for the other educational groups.

Insufficient resources have been a major topic in research related to social work (Blomberg et al., 2015). Ethical awareness is a fundamental part of professional social work, and hence the ability and commitment to act in accordance with ethical guidelines are crucial aspects of social work practices. Working in high strain jobs, under the pressure of overwhelming workloads may lead to the need of compromising one's professional ethics. In turn, such compromises might result in moral distress and thus lower dedication to work (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016). As our analysis have shown, social workers (alongside workers with education within social sciences) are especially prone to experience less dedication to their work as a result of high workloads.

Finally, another striking finding of the study at hand was the lack of connection between attitudes towards activation policies and level of dedication among social workers. Whereas for workers with social science education and those with lower education, a relatively strong relationship between attitudes and dedication was found, such a statistically significant relationship did not exist for our sample of social workers. However, as our hierarchical analysis showed, before taking job characteristics into account, social workers attitudes towards activation policies did significantly influence their dedication to work. Thus suggesting that it is particularly under high strain conditions (high demands, low control and support) that social workers relatively less endorsing attitudes towards activation policies

influence their dedication to work. Moreover, these findings highlight the paramount importance of job characteristics in explaining dedication among social workers, even overshadowing the associations between attitudes and dedication. Thus, satisfactory job conditions may buffer possible mismatches between workers' attitudes and the organisation's overarching policies. Accordingly, under conditions of adequate job resources, perceptions of relative control and support from colleagues and managers, the social worker manage to maintain high levels of dedication to work and adjust well to the tensions between ethical codes of conduct and policy reforms ostensibly aiming towards neoliberal, individual responsibility lines of thinking, such as activation policies.

The paramount query is whether our findings should be understood as a reflection of Hasenfeld's concern of a possible corruption of ethical norms of the social work profession as a consequence of activation policies (1999), or rather as a relative agreement between social work ideology and the Norwegian type of lenient activation policies, as suggested by several observers (Eleveld, 2017; Sadeghi & Terum, 2020; Gjersøe et al., 2019; Vilhena, 2020).

Notwithstanding the few differences between the educational groups considered in this study, an obvious implication is in fostering dedicated activation workers should to a higher extent focus on working conditions rather than workers' educational backgrounds. More specifically, in order to increase workers' dedication and presumably improve their work performances, NAV as an activation work context ought to place greater emphasis on job-redesign aimed at enhancing job resources.

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