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The use of a client-feedback system in activation encounters

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ABSTRACT
This article builds on 13 audio-recorded and transcribed encounters between counsellors and users in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, where a client-feedback system plays a mediating role in interactions. We study how counsellors and users establish and maintain common ground in interactions and the role the feedback system plays in this regard. We analyse their interactions in light of Goffman's concept of a working consensus, as it illuminates how interaction tends to steer towards intersubjective consensus. The findings show that the feedback system is both a 'facilitator' and 'troublemaker' in this process. The feedback system both functions as an interactional resource that helps counsellors and service users define and manoeuvre the situation and sometimes causes interactional problems that must be dealt with without damaging the relationship. Possible consequences are discussed, including implications of using a feedback system in activation encounters where the overall goal is employment.

KEYWORDS
Interactional studies; activation encounters; working consensus; user involvement; feedback device

Introduction

Social worker–service user encounters in public welfare services typically involve the assessment of users' needs and entitlements to services (Kadushian and Kadushian 2013; Hall et al. 2014; Parker 2015). Although user involvement is a required public service provision, the implementation of such involvement varies (Beresford 2012; Andreassen 2019). More than just signifying a position with more or less participatory power (Arnstein 1969) or dialogical skills (Born and Jensen 2010), user participation is increasingly understood in terms of an interactive and relational process in which the social worker and user cyclically respond to each other (Beresford 2012; Shulman 2016). For example, when a social worker deals directly with concerns raised by a user, and the social worker does so empathetically and nonjudgmentally, this likely increases the user's involvement in the interaction (Shulman 2016). In addition, user participation is important for accountability in processes involving professional discretionary decisions (Molander, Grimen, and Eriksen 2012; Andreassen 2019). One way to improve accountability of such processes is to expand the interactional space to achieve mutual understandings and justifications (Andreassen 2019), and one solution is to implement participatory devices that emphasize the user's viewpoints and accounts (Molander, Grimen, and Eriksen 2012).

In conjunction with a service development project in the Norwegian Welfare and Labour Administration (NAV), a local NAV office integrated a client-feedback system to promote user involvement for users (18–29 years) with health- and/or social-related problems in addition to unemployment (Bø-Rygg and Oltedal 2017). NAV aims to assist the unemployed and others not engaged in work gain employment by increasing their 'employability' (Minas 2009), which refers to a concept usually encompassing human capital components (e.g. formal skills), career

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management components (e.g. job-searching skills) and contextual components (e.g. work-life demands) (Williams et al. 2016). Work-oriented services in NAV involve finding solutions that take into account the policy goal of employment, NAV's framework and regulations, and the users' specific needs and circumstances. In this article, we study activation encounters between counsellors and users within the NAV service development project where the Partners for Change Outcome Management System (PCOMS; Duncan 2012) was used as a participatory device. PCOMS builds on research on common factors of therapy (e.g. therapist qualities, client expectations and alliance) and consists of two brief measures, one monitoring client progress and the other the therapeutic alliance (Duncan 2012). Research has shown that the systematic use of common factors improves therapy outcomes (Barth et al. 2012; Sparks and Duncan 2018) and strengthens 'the working relationship' in social work (Shulman 2016). However, knowledge about the systematic use of such common factors in social work settings is scarce (Barth et al. 2012), and more empirical research is needed to better understand how specific interactions either strengthen the working relationship or prevent it from developing (Shulman 2016). Bartels (2013) calls for further research on how communicative practices in public encounters structure the mutual ability of public professionals and citizens to make claims, influence decisions and understand each other. We aim to address this knowledge gap by considering the communicative practices in our study as social products emerging from an interactive, relational and situated process (Bartels 2013) between NAV counsellors and users. We start with an understanding that all conversational devices, despite varying standardizations, have theoretical and normative underpinnings that shape social interaction in both specific and unpredictable ways (Prior 2003; Parker 2015). Our research question is as follows: *How do social workers and users establish and maintain a common ground for interaction within the institutional context of NAV, and what is the role of a client-feedback system in this regard?*

Previous research

Social worker–service user encounters in NAV can be conceptualized as institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage 1992), which is characterized by goal orientation and constraints according to the institution's framework and procedures. Previous research on institutional interactions in welfare service settings has focused on how professionals translate policy goals and balance institutional requirements with personalization principles in direct practice with users. Research suggests that social workers pragmatically switch between bureaucratic and person-centred approaches (Hansen and Natland 2017; Olsen and Ellingsen 2019) and enact personalization on twocontinuums ranging from organization- to user-defined content and spanning from scripted to tailored approaches (Toerien et al. 2013). Research has also focused on how professionals and users accomplish, share, contest and resist institutional tasks, identities or categories. Research suggests that interactions where social workers take a 'non-expert' stance and actively work to listen to and understand users' experiences contribute to shared understandings (Lee, Herschman, and Johnstone 2019), building relationships with users (Symonds 2018) and increasing users' perceived abilities to perform skills associated with employability (Danneris and Dall 2017). Users may, however, align with the institutional identities offered to them by explaining or justifying accounts if they do not meet the professionals' expectations (Solberg 2011) or through diplomatic accounts that defend their moral identity as an 'appropriate' user (Flinkfeldt 2017; Solberg 2017). Users may also negotiate institutional identities and categories (e.g. what it means to be an 'active job-seeker') by drawing on context-specific discursive resources (Eskelinen, Olesen, and Caswell 2010; Caswell, Eskelinen, and Olesen 2013). Research has further focused on how standardized formats and conversation devices shape institutional interaction. Research suggest that although strict standardized formats with established rules for conversation (e.g., questionnaires) limit user participation, flexible formats with more room for user actions and narratives may be less transparent to users (Matarese and Caswell 2017). Moreover, professionals and users collaboratively develop strategies

to manage standardized interaction, for example, by using face-work, meta-comments and taking 'off-track' interactions (Barfoed 2018; Symonds 2018).

Research on follow-up encounters in NAV has paid little attention to counsellor–user interactions as communicative practices unfolding in real time (Riis-Johansen et al. 2018). In this article, we take a consensus perspective (Goffman 1959) of social worker–user interactions in NAV, which allows us to see how both parties coordinate their talk and behaviour to ensure valued responses and avoid interactional troubles. However, social work within public welfare services creates a framework where social workers must balance the process and outcome with helping and controlling functions (Healy 2012). As Goffman's conceptualization has been criticized for overlooking the power imbalance in institutional interactions (Manning 2008), in this article, we understand PCOMS as a participatory device that can level such imbalance. By studying the mediating role of a feedback system in how social workers and users are 'saying, being and doing together' (Bartels 2013), our aim is twofold: first, to extend current knowledge on how user involvement develops in interactive, relational and situated processes between social workers and users in welfare encounters; second, to gain more knowledge on how a participatory device originally developed for therapeutic clinical work mediates this process within the institutional NAV setting.

Theoretical perspective: working consensus

For Goffman, all interactions carry the risk of humiliation and rejection, and each individual is therefore interested in reaching an intersubjective understanding that prevents open conflict and ensures that others will respond in a valued and appropriate way. In other words, people perform for others in the interest of order (Manning 2008). Goffman (1959) claims that people who engage in a social activity will naturally seek to reach a common definition of the situation to determine how to act. Each person will acquire the most information possible about others present either by searching documentary evidence (e.g. social workers in NAV will read user journals/documents), relying on what others tell about themselves, looking for consistency in others' conduct or applying untested stereotypes to others (Goffman 1959). The further process of establishing and sustaining a working consensus requires that people suppress their true immediate feelings and instead convey a value to the situation that everyone present can accept and oblige themselves to (Goffman 1959). In this sense, everyone tries to control others' impressions of the situation by selectively presenting performances and responses that adequately sustain the working consensus 'on which interaction depends' (Manning 2008, 681). This does not mean that people necessarily act in a deliberately false or calculating manner. Rather, each person rationalizes which matters are important. On this basis, each puts forward certain assertions of the situation (e.g. claims for recognition, status or interactional objective) that he/she believes others will accommodate. For example, when a person claims to have certain social characteristics, he/she is morally obliged to be whom he/she claims to be, and the others present are obliged by the claim to treat that person according to his/her projection of him/herself (Goffman 1959, 13). Negative responses to such claims may result in embarrassment, withdrawal and defence, while positive confirmation contributes to maintaining a consensual interaction (Manning 2008). A working consensus, therefore, represents no real agreement but rather a mutual acceptance of certain claims to the situation (Goffman 1959).

Methods and materials

This study draws on data from the service development project *Ung@jobb* (Young@work). Between 2013 and 2016, 110 service users in two NAV offices received follow-up from the project, of which 23 participated in this research study. Both NAV offices integrated extra time resources and conversational devices, including PCOMS, into their ordinary follow-up of the target group. Ung@Jobb aimed to strengthen the quality and competence of NAV's services targeting

unemployed youth (18–29 years) 'at risk of receiving disability pension at an early age' (Bø-Rygg and Oltedal 2017, 13). This included users entitled to 'specially adjusted follow-up owing to health- and/or social-related problems affecting their ability to gain or keep a job' (The Labour and Welfare Administration Act of 2006, §14). The users received other welfare services, such as mental health and career guidance services, in addition to NAV services.

The analysis builds on 23 audio-recorded and transcribed encounters between NAV counsellors and users in Ung@jobb, conducted as part of the long-term follow-up from NAV where involved parties had already met on several occasions. One male and five female counsellors (educated as social workers, teachers and police) and 23 users (14 female and nine male) participated in these encounters. Recorded conversations totalled 15 hours, with an average of approximately 44 minutes per conversation. This article focuses specifically on the 13 encounters in our dataset wherein PCOMS was used. Data were collected in 2015, and a researcher was present during all conversations. Although the researcher did not directly intervene in conversations, we acknowledge that data are social products (Charmaz 2014). Hansen and Natland (2017), for example, propose that a researcher's presence in social worker–user encounters may influence users' sensitivity to certain questions and social workers' projections of themselves as professionals. We find Hansen and Natland's point to be especially relevant in our study in light of Goffman's perspective on social interaction that people primarily perform for others.

The Norwegian Social Science Data Service has approved the study. Participation was voluntary, and all participants gave their informed consent. Service user participants were informed that they had the right to not participate in the study without harming their NAV services or benefits. The research was conducted in line with the *Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology* (NESH 2016).

Outcome rating scale and session rating scale

PCOMS consists of two brief measures (Duncan 2012): the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS), which monitors the client's view on progress and therapy outcomes, and the Session Rating Scale (SRS), which monitors the client's view on the therapeutic alliance. Both measures comprise visual analogue scales, each consisting of four linear continuums with the low estimate to the left (0) and the high to the right (10). ORS entails four items concerning the client's perception of (1) personal distress or well-being (personal), (2) family and close relationships (interpersonal-relational), (3) satisfaction with work/school/friendships (social) and (4) distress or well-being in general (overall). SRS comprises four items concerning the client's perception of (1) being heard, understood and respected (therapeutic relationship); (2) the utility and relevance of goals and topics (goals and topics); (3) the approach or method being used (approach and method); and (4) the encounter in general (overall).

In Ung@Jobb, PCOMS encounters began with the counsellor inviting the user to fill out the ORS, followed by a summing up of scores. The next step involved integrating the current scores into a visual graph showing scores over time, which enabled a comparison between current and previous scores. The encounters ended with the NAV counsellor inviting the user to fill out the SRS. Beyond the PCOMS ritual in the encounters, the time and effort spent on the two devices varied.

Analysis

In our analysis, we have applied grounded theory techniques to highlight both performative and relational dimensions of human interaction, and these techniques combine well with other analytical tools, such as abduction (Charmaz 2014). Throughout our analysis, we systematically discussed our findings in a reflexive manner and included memos to explicate our reflections (Charmaz 2014). The second author was part of the data-gathering process, whereas the first author listened to the audio-recordings while concurrently reading transcriptions to become familiar with the data. The

total data corpus of 23 conversations was first subject to open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We started with a close line-by-line reading with in-vivo codes, followed by several re-readings wherein we coded conversation sequences on topics and actions/interactions. Through constant comparison of codes across the dataset (Strauss and Corbin 1998), we identified clusters of codes sorted under three overall categories: 1) alliance work (proactive contributions to the working relationship), 2) ordering work (utterances/acts elucidating responsibilities and course of action) and 3) self-development work (initiatives actualizing psychological matters and mental coping strategies). In the axial coding phase (Strauss and Corbin 1998), we identified the ways in which categories related to each other, under what conditions the categories occurred and what consequences the categories generated in the interaction. At this stage, it became clear that, due to participants' meta-communication regarding the feedback devices, the three categories were more frequent and intertwined in the 13 encounters with PCOMS than in the 10 conversations without. In our further analysis, we therefore decided to include only the 13 PCOMS encounters and juxtapose the three empirical categories with Goffman's (1959) working consensus concept, which we perceived to be a good fit. Through our further abductive analysis, we defined 'alliance work' and 'ordering work' as procedural dimensions (the 'how') of consensus-based interactions and 'self-development work' as belonging to the substantive dimension (the 'what'). However, our analysis suggests that 'self-development' in the NAV context should be sorted under the psychological capital dimension of employability (Williams et al. 2016), which includes, for example, the willingness and ability to adapt to new circumstances.

The excerpts presented in the findings section have been selected because they demonstrate tendencies across the 13 encounters. Excerpts have been translated from Norwegian into English and are presented to visualize the dynamics of the conversations.

Findings

The analysis show that the use of a feedback system in activation encounters in NAV makes relevant meta-communication about the counsellor-user relationship (alliance), the course of action (ordering), and their interactional purpose (self-development). We consider such meta-communication to be something that facilitates the process of establishing and sustaining a working consensus, as described by Goffman (1959). Although Goffman's concept of a working consensus pertains to two interactional phases (establishing and sustaining intersubjectivity), we have chosen to present our findings in three phases: 1) establishing a working consensus and 2) sustaining a working consensus and 3) renegotiating a working consensus. This division is for pedagogical reasons since, in Goffman's writing, sustaining a working consensus naturally includes negotiating behaviours.

Establishing a working consensus

People who are involved in a social activity will naturally seek information about the situation and others present to determine what to expect and how to act (Goffman 1959). The findings show that, in this information-seeking phase, the ORS task offers a collaborative structure for establishing a common ground for the interaction. The following excerpt shows how the ORS task plays out at the beginning of encounters:

Counsellor: let us start as we usually do, which is me asking you to consider how you are doing [today

Pia: [okay

Counsellor: relating to these four variables [personal, relational, social and overall]. It is an opportunity for me to get to know you and to respect how you are doing and to clarify what NAV can do to support you, or if someone else is supporting you

Pia: I get it

Counsellor: so, scales run from low to high, or from nil to 10, and you mark according to your perception of how you are doing

Pia: okay [Pia marks the ORS scale]

Through meta-communication on the ORS task, the counsellor states the institutional purpose of the task, which is to clarify the user's need for services, and explains the task procedures and the responsibilities in this regard (ordering work). The counsellor signals a positive interest in Pia's well-being and in providing personalized service for her (alliance work). Even though Pia is already familiar with ORS procedures, we see that she provides small verifications, such as 'okay' and 'I get it', thus encouraging further initiatives from the counsellor. Pia's behaviour can be interpreted as passive or subordinating behaviour that paves the way for this institutional task. In a Goffmanian perspective, such confirming behaviour displays how people cooperate to accomplish a task. Furthermore, when the counsellor highlights the enabling effect of ORS on her own professional ability to provide personalized service to Pia, she implicitly suggests that a positive service outcome depends on both taking on mutual obligations. In underscoring the interdependency of their relationship, the counsellor sends a normative expectation regarding the alliance. By agreeing to such basic moral rules for the interaction, Pia contributes to establishing the counsellor–user relationship as a vital medium for change.

However, establishing a working consensus involves reaching a common understanding not only of interactional rules and moral obligations but also of the interactional purpose. People who are involved in a social activity will convey situational readings that assert values that others can accept and oblige themselves to (Goffman 1959). Our findings suggest that PCOMS has latent underpinnings that both counsellors and users accept and accommodate (at least temporarily) when they engage in feedback procedures:

Pia: The heart of soul and change [Pia chuckles]

Counsellor: [What he, Barry Duncan [PCOMS originator], says is that, if you think about what it takes to make a change in one's life, it is very much about your own resources, your own network and your personality, which is where the biggest opportunity lies [...]

Pia: I think it is nice that you have bothered to make a graph for me.

Counsellor: [Laughs softly] what is nice is that you have become aware that life changes in a positive direction and that you yourself have become conscious of what you must do to make life work

Pia: or what factors pull me down.

Counsellor: yes, what pulls you down and what pulls you up.

This excerpt shows how Pia and the counsellor achieve a common understanding of what the situation is substantially about, namely that Pia develops strategies to make her life 'work' (self-development work), with support from the counsellor. First, we see how the counsellor's meta-comment about the PCOMS originator sends a normative assertion regarding the individual's ability to evolve and make changes in life. Next, Pia offers a proactive contribution to alliance work by appreciating the counsellor's efforts to make a graph that shows changes in her life over time. By supporting each other's claims about requirements for 'making life work', they cooperatively establish self-development as an important element in the relationship. Likewise, when interacting on the SRS task at the end of the encounter, they are confronted with each other's understandings of what is required of them in this relational process.

In the following excerpt, the counsellor conveys her understanding of how they both can develop through this process:

Counsellor: let us see: what is important is that I think about what I can do to meet people in a good way, and you have to somehow try to use the ORS to think a little about what is going on in your life.

Pia: I already think about that

Counsellor: yes, you do, but this helps to visualize it

Pia: yes

The counsellor explains that she needs to focus on meeting people ‘in a good way’ and Pia needs to think about ‘what is going on’ in her life. In this way, they can both contribute to Pia’s personal growth. In what follows, Pia and the counsellor modify each other’s notions without disrupting the interaction. Although we find varying degrees of mutual endorsement in encounters involving PCOMS, the findings show that counsellors and users adapt to the notion that a successful outcome of the interaction depends on a ‘strong’ alliance with both individual and mutual obligations. Thus, establishing a working consensus also involves reaching a common understanding of how interactional purposes are intertwined with relational obligations.

Sustaining the working consensus

So far, we have shown how the feedback system, through the counsellors’ meta-communication of OSR/SRS and through mutual accommodations of latent underpinnings (Prior 2003; Parker 2015) of PCOMS, provides a structure for reaching a common understanding and manoeuvring the situation. The findings further show that counsellors and users adjust their own behaviours and their behaviours towards each other based on their intersubjective understanding of the situation. When such a consensus is established, people selectively present performances and responses that are adequate for sustaining the consensus (Goffman 1959). The following excerpt displays how the counsellor and Hans cooperate to keep the interaction ‘on track’ in relation to the ORS task:

Counsellor: yes, look here [points to the graph], something has happened, something you have perceived as positive. Has anything nice happened lately concerning friends or school or . . .

Hans: no, not really, it just feels that way

Counsellor: it feels a bit brighter?

Hans: yes, maybe it is the season; winter has passed and all

Counsellor: yes [points again to the graph], this was in October [six months ago], and winter was coming, and we talked about your concerns for your family. You were going to talk with a lawyer about your [childhood

Hans: [mmm . . .

Counsellor: about things that really are heavy to think about

Hans: yes [Hans also points to the graph] and here it was summer

Counsellor: yes, summer

Hans: here

Counsellor: I guess it was here that you told me about your sister

Hans: my sister, yes

Counsellor: so, clearly we do not live our lives in solitude

Hans: no, we don’t.

The excerpt shows how the feedback graph acts as a common focal point that helps the two parties maintain a common visual and cognitive focus during the interaction. Both parties display a willingness and endurance to engage in the ORS task, which not only involves identifying and summing up scores but also exploring possible explanations for scores. However, when Hans's initial response ('No, not really') to the counsellor's eliciting question ('Has anything nice happened lately?') does not meet the counsellor's expectation, the counsellor's use of paraphrasing ('It feels a bit brighter?') encourages further elaboration. The excerpt thus illustrates the counsellor's strategy for eliciting greater reflection from the user (Lee, Herschman, and Johnstone 2019).

When the user shares, the counsellor has an opportunity to respond to his expressed needs and adjust services accordingly, for example, by providing information about other welfare services that could be relevant. When users' ORS scores increase, this provides an opportunity for counsellors to help them see any gains arising from their own efforts (Duncan 2012). The counsellors in our study showed discretion when asking users to elaborate on scores, which emphasizes that the users decide whether to share, though paraphrasing questions could be interpreted as a way of pushing the user to give an answer more in line with the counsellor's expectations. However, when Hans continues to engage in the exploring dialogue, this may be an example of how trust and reciprocity are displayed in human interaction (Goffman 1959). The excerpt also shows that, when Hans and the counsellor explore Hans' scores, they both take an interactional risk as they venture into Hans' emotional landscape relating to family difficulties. However, we find that cooperative identifications of factors that negatively affect users' lives generate talk of solutions. For example, although not included in this excerpt, the counsellor later suggested several ways that Hans could take care of himself, including coping strategies, such as 'go for walks' when family conflicts escalate and 'attend a folk high school [folkehøgskole]' to get away from home.

Preventing interactional trouble

The findings show that both parties make an effort to keep the interaction on track to prevent interactional trouble. Once an activity is framed, people tend to act according to the established purpose and rules of conduct, as frame-breaking makes the situation challenging for all parties (Goffman 1959). However, the findings show that the SRS task, which involves users giving feedback on how they perceive the relationship with the counsellor and the follow-up in general, seems in itself to carry the risk of causing interactional trouble. In the following excerpt, Anne has just marked her SRS scores, followed by the counsellor's comparison of that day's score with the previous score:

Counsellor: I see that your score is continuously high all the way. Is there anything you wish was different in our conversations?

Anne: no, we address most of my problems, so to speak, and what we talk about usually is followed up. So, in general, things have improved compared to when I had her [name of another counsellor] and QP [Qualification Programme]

Counsellor: yes, but it is important that you give me feedback, or at least if there is something relating to my conduct in conversations, or if you feel that you are not being heard

Anne: no, you are one of the best [counsellors] I have had here [in NAV], you, who use your head and do not go solely by the book

Despite repeated encouragement to report any discontentment, the users in our study gave high scores to counsellor's approach and the relationship. However, the users displayed reluctance to elaborate on SRS scores, at least when compared to their behaviour on the ORS task. The users' high scores and reassurances to the counsellor may reflect their actual positive experiences with the project follow-up or may show impatience to end the meeting, as encounters usually end with the SRS task. The findings nonetheless suggest that the SRS task puts pressure on the interaction in

terms of both counsellors' eliciting questions and the users' reluctance to share, as both behaviours can be perceived by the other as frame-breaking occurrences.

Restoring interaction

Disruptions sometimes occurred in the interactions in our study, and some of these were directly related to ORS/SRS procedures, as we have thematized above. In these situations, we found that the counsellors skilfully took the responsibility to restore the interactions by compensating for discrediting occurrences that were not successfully avoided. The next excerpt shows how the counsellor copes with such an occurrence related to the ORS procedures, where Brit's scores counter the counsellor's perception of Brit's situation:

Counsellor: so, I have been thinking since we last met because you often mark that you are doing great, just as you did the last time

Brit: yes

Counsellor: and that is just fine. However, I would like you to reflect more thoroughly on your scores. There is a reason for us being in contact, you being in treatment and all. Let me show you, here [points to a specific level on the graph], your scores are high, and here [points to a lower level on the graph], this is what they call the 'cut-off'. Scores above that indicate that you don't need any services [. . .] I might have failed in explaining, most likely, which might be the reason why you score this way

Brit: well, in any case, right now, I am actually here, at the bottom [points to the low part of the scale] there has been so much going on lately [Brit proceeds with narrative.]

Brit has scored herself beyond the cut-off point, which, according to the counsellor, is 'not realistic' due to all the challenges in Brit's life. Thus, in an ORS interaction, the cut-off constitutes a 'frame' for what counts as appropriate contributions from users relating to this particular activity. However, after addressing the 'problem', the counsellor attempts to restore the interaction by skilfully taking the blame for the discrepancy between Brit's scores and the situation, as judged by the counsellor. Brit admits that the scores do not reflect how she perceives her current life situation and then elaborates on some recent stressful events in her life. In general, when users' ORS/SRS scores contradict the counsellor's definition of the situation, this raises a dilemma for the counsellor that must be addressed without harming the relationship. As shown in the above excerpt, when counsellors address contradicting situational readings, they do this in a manner that protects the user from embarrassment, and they often make use of meta-communication to repair such interactional trouble. This kind of repairing behaviour contributes to maintaining the working consensus.

Renegotiating the working consensus

At some point in the interaction, preliminary intersubjective definitions of the situation no longer are perceived to be valid due to new or conflicting information. In the following excerpt, the counsellor and user negotiate the consequences of new information for their established situational reading:

Counsellor: What are your thoughts about a job at this point?

Siri: if I were an employer, I would not hire myself. One day, I easily cope an hour, another day maybe four and the next day hardly any [. . .] and if I try to push myself, I end up all exhausted, and that does not go well with having [a child] who needs help with homework and stuff

Counsellor: I have now read [your journal] thoroughly, and my opinion is that we have reached an end to this case. Your doctor's assessment is in line with yours, and he considers your back

problems to be related to other things in your life, like your depression and you being a single mother with responsibilities and all. He concludes that no treatment will make it better [...] actually, last time we met, you said that you wanted to work?

Siri: Well, I do want to work, but when my body does not listen to me, there is not really much I can do

Counsellor: so, have you set a limit now, or what?

Siri: I want to work, but at this point in life, I cannot

The counsellor has acquired information about Siri's health condition through a medical report, and the counsellor tries to synthesize this documentary evidence with Siri's perception of how her health condition affects her ability to work. Siri expresses both a wish to work and that she is unable to work due to her back pain and parenting role. Thus, the excerpt illustrates how counsellors and users may negotiate and renegotiate an institutional category (work capability). The counsellor holds Siri accountable for the apparent discrepancy in her communication. However, through Siri's distinction between mind (wanting to work) and body (unable to work), she manages to enact a 'sick role' that 'makes it possible to display a negative stance towards employment without implying a lack of motivation to working more generally' (Flinkfeldt 2017, 1162). Later in the encounter, the counsellor ends up supporting Siri's understanding and justification of how her health problems, together with being a single parent, represent overly severe barriers for work, and they start preparing for Siri's application for disability pension.

Managing open conflict

Sometimes, the two parties define the situation differently, and this might lead to an open dispute in the interaction. In the following, the counsellor brings documentary evidence into the interaction, which leads to a face-threatening situation:

Counsellor: And motivation is something you have been struggling with?

Pia: It is like, I came back from [rehabilitation] to start school, and they [NAV] told me that I had more rights when I had both physical and mental injuries, and then, I went to school for six months despite [health challenges] [...] I worked on my results while I received treatment, and then, I got a letter from NAV saying I had to quit school, and then, I just had to give up. I have to protest when you say that my motivation has varied

Counsellor: yes, you are allowed to protest

Pia: yes

Counsellor: yes, absolutely, and I guess I was thinking about something I read in that [medical] report. I have not experienced you that way. I see you as motivated, and you have been consistent in everything you have told me

Pia: good

Having read Pia's journal before the encounter, the counsellor uses this information to put forward a claim that conflicts with the impression Pia attempts to convey of herself in situ. The counsellor refers to Pia having quit school and poses a generalizing question that implies Pia is 'struggling' with her motivation in general. When documents are brought into play during interactions, and the documents contradict the impression that people attempt to convey in situ, this typically leads to interactional trouble (Goffman 1959). We see that Pia responds to the social worker by projecting a picture of herself as quite the opposite. Through Pia's account of how she attended school despite health challenges and treatment, Pia is in fact establishing an identity as highly motivated and conscientious, which is an example of how users may defend their moral

identity (Solberg 2017; Lee, Herschman, and Johnstone 2019). The counsellor and Pia deal with the interactional discrepancy through Pia's explicit objection to the counsellor's claim and subsequent withdrawal of this claim, with the counsellor emphasizing that Pia has given a consistent impression of being motivated. Looking for consistency in other people is a strategy for attaining information about them and making judgements on the situation (Goffman 1959). Through Pia's narrative about how NAV first approved education as a work-oriented measure, followed by their retraction, she further displays an implicit distrust in NAV's decision-making processes. Later in the encounter, the counsellor reformulates Pia's activity plan and justifies the correction by stating 'because what *you* are saying [. . .] is that education and formal skills, not work practice, is what *you* consider will improve your situation' (emphasis added). By aligning with Pia's judgement on her situation and her preference for education over work practice, the counsellor ensures that she listens properly to what Pia says, and moreover, the counsellor displays trust in Pia's ability to assess what services she needs from NAV to obtain a job. In this way, the counsellor also contributes to 'repairing' Pia's distrust in NAV's ability to make sound decisions.

Discussion and concluding remarks

We have analysed social worker–user interactions in NAV as communicative practices emerging from an interactive process where the impetus is to ensure valued responses and avoid humiliation or rejection, as described by Goffman (1959). This consensus perspective, on the one hand, enabled us to see how social worker–user interactions involving feedback tasks, social workers' meta-communication and users' alignment to such meta-communication eased the process of establishing and sustaining a common ground for interaction. The findings show that ORS provided a collaborative structure that helped social workers and users manoeuvre the situation. We argue that the feedback system, especially ORS, played a facilitator role in reaching and maintaining intersubjective consensus in the collaborative project. Our claim must be viewed in light of the complex competences and extensive interactional work that is required on behalf of both social workers and users to accomplish intersubjectivity without being perceived as biased or strategic in the process (Flinkfeldt 2017, 1162) or without harming the relationship (Caswell, Eskelinen, and Olesen 2013; Solberg 2017, 2011). Findings further show that interactional sequences with ORS systematically opened up a space for users to raise personal concerns that were supportively met by the social workers. Previous research has shown that this kind of social worker–user interaction is positively associated with user involvement and relationship building (Shulman 2016; Matarese and Caswell 2017; Barfoed 2018; Symonds 2018; Lee, Herschman, and Johnstone 2019).

On the other hand, Goffman's perspective also enabled us to see that the feedback system sometimes caused interactional trouble that was dealt with collaboratively. However, despite social workers' rather extensive use of paraphrasing in the ORS task if user responses did not meet their expectations, the social workers demonstrated complex skills to protect users from embarrassment. However, in SRS interactions, which involve users' views on the relationship and interactional process, the findings suggest that the social workers took a more confronting approach and the users a more passive stance than in ORS interactions, which sometimes led to interactional trouble. We therefore argue that the feedback system, especially SRS, sometimes had a 'troublemaker role' in reaching and maintaining a congruous interaction. In and through SRS interactions, the social workers framed the SRS task as being crucial for the outcome of service and sent a normative expectation regarding the users' moral obligation in this regard (to score authentically). The users thus faced an interactional dilemma: Should they score authentically and be helpful in terms of contributing to service development, or should they score in a way that sustains their in-situ relationship with the social worker? The high SRS scores provided by the users in our study may very well reflect their actual experiences with services. However, high scores and reassurances may also be a 'way out' for users on the SRS task, as a low score could have put them in a face-threatening situation where they felt obliged to account for any dissatisfaction directly to the counsellor's face.

Solberg (2011, 2017) found that users in NAV activation encounters opposed counsellors' eliciting questions in a manner that saved face for both themselves and their counsellors, which points to a central point in Goffman's universe. Although people resist or oppose others' conduct or claims to the situation, they likely attempt to do this in a way that prevents humiliation or open conflict (Goffman 1959). However, in light of Goffman's notion about people's tendency to perform 'for others' to prevent social embarrassment and rejection, we consider that there was no easy 'way out' with the SRS task, especially for users, as critiquing social workers directly to their face poses a 'threat' to the situation and relationship (Goffman 1959).

As mentioned in the article's introduction, professional judgement is about managing accountability. The findings suggest that a feedback system, such as PCOMS, facilitates the process of accomplishing mutual understandings and justifications, thereby improving the accountability of discretionary decision-making processes (Molander, Grimen, and Eriksen 2012; Andreassen 2019). However, although the flexibility of PCOMS allows for integration into NAV's framework and objectives, the findings also show that, when a therapeutic device is transferred to this setting, it may have some unfavourable implications. In NAV, work-oriented services for users with health and social problems besides unemployment involve increasing user's employability. Employability, in a broad sense, includes psychological components (Williams et al. 2016), and we find ORS to be useful in this respect. However, by focusing too one-sidedly on the individual's ability to develop and overcome life challenges, and making the working relationship the main catalyst for such change, the use of a feedback system in this setting could take focus away from other, and perhaps more prominent, components of employability. If feedback devices are to be used in employment services, such as NAV, we suggest them be integrated within a framework that systematically focuses on employability as a multidimensional construct (Williams et al. 2016). Thus, the working relationship (Shulman 2016) more likely will result in 'hard' outcomes (e.g. employment) as well as 'soft' outcomes (e.g. increased well-being) for the user.

Despite the limitations of our findings due to the study's small sample and project context, the findings suggest that systematic feedback devices, such as ORS, may have a positive impact on social worker–user interactions in terms of user involvement and relationship building. However, as Goffman's consensus concept pays little attention to the power imbalance in institutional interactions (Manning 2008), we are aware that our analysis may have obscured power-related explanations of our study's social worker–user interactions. Following Bartels (2013), we suggest that future research examine social worker–user interactions in welfare services as relational and situated performances that can inform decision-making processes at higher levels of society. We welcome research based on recordings of actual interactional processes in social work (Shulman 2016) that can extend the existing knowledge about how, over a longer time span, a working consensus comes about, is disrupted and maintained through human relationships and mediating tools.

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Explanation of excerpt punctuation

[. . .] Removal of words or phrases due to repetition/phrase complexity.
[Text] Nonverbal action/sound or explanation of words preceding brackets.
[Overlap, i.e. both parties talk simultaneously.

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