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Ambivalence in activation encounters

Ambivalens i aktiveringsmøter

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ABSTRACT

It continues to be unclear what opportunities and challenges that lie in the activation encounter as a communicative and relational situation. This study assumes that ambivalence is present in such encounters since ambivalence is common in transitions, relationships, and organisations. As a response to the limited body of knowledge about situated and relational aspects of activation work, this study examines handlings of ambivalence in authentic encounters between activation workers and young adults experiencing health and social barriers to employment. Data comprise recordings and transcripts of 23 counsellor-user encounters in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service. The findings show that ambivalence is present when possible next steps in the activation process are discussed, and subsequently influence decisions regarding next steps. While the counsellors display strong ambivalence when concrete job opportunities or disability pension are up for discussion, the users display strong ambivalence to work-oriented measures, and to some extent also to education and to employment when discussed as general and long-term goals. Findings are discussed considering theory and research on policy delivery.

SAMMENDRAG

Det er fortsatt uklart hvilke muligheter og utfordringer som ligger i aktiveringsmøtet som en kommunikativ og relasjonell situasjon. Denne studien antar at ambivalens er til stede i slike møter siden ambivalens er vanlig i overganger, relasjoner og organisasjoner. Som et svar på den begrensede mengden kunnskap om situerte og relasjonelle aspekter ved aktiveringsarbeid, undersøker denne studien håndtering av ambivalens i autentiske møter mellom frontlinjearbeidere og arbeidsledige unge voksne med helserelevante og sosiale problemer. Data omfatter lydopptak og transkripsjoner av 23 brukermøter i Norsk arbeids- og velferdsetat (NAV). Funnene viser at ambivalens er til stede når mulige 'neste steg' i aktiveringsprosessen diskuteres og påvirker beslutninger om videre kurs. De profesjonelle viser sterk ambivalens når konkrete jobbmuligheter eller uførepensjon er oppe til diskusjon, mens brukerne uttrykker sterk ambivalens til arbeidsrettede tiltak, og til en viss grad også til utdanning og til arbeid når disse diskuteres som generelle og langsiktige mål. Funn diskuteres med tanke på teori og forskning om politikklevering.

KEYWORDS

Ambivalence; activation; street-level; policy delivery; social work

NØKKEORD

Ambivalens; aktivering; frontlinje; politikklevering; sosialt arbeid

Introduction

Social work aims to enable change in individuals and society through principles of self-determination and social justice. At the individual level, social work seeks to increase autonomy and well-being, for example, by facilitating education or employment. In this process, the social worker functions as a mediator between clients and their environment (Shulman, 2012) and negotiates with several stakeholders (Healy, 2014), including the work organisation and government policies. As street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), social workers face environments that are specifically designed to achieve policy goals (Lipsky, 1980/2010), for example, through performance management systems and standardisations. Concurrently, they are expected to be responsive to individual cases (Lipsky, 1980/2010). This structurally built-in cross-pressure of the social worker role is a well-known source of ambivalence (Merton & Barber, 1976). Ambivalence is described as having ‘mixed feelings’ or being ‘drawn in different directions’ and as simultaneously experiencing positive and negative orientations towards an object, such as a goal or task (Ashforth et al., 2014, p. 1454). There are different views on what triggers ambivalence. Simply put, psychology emphasises individual characteristics and relationships, while sociology emphasises social structures, such as norms and roles (Ashforth et al., 2014). Merton and Barber (1976) state that professional relationships entail ambivalence on behalf of both parties. Being dependent on public assistance due to, for example, disability or unemployment, can trigger feelings of respect for professional help and, simultaneously, frustration if the help is perceived as inadequate (Merton & Barber, 1976). Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips (2011) argue that ambivalence cannot be understood in isolation from the social relations and environments in which it arises. However, few studies have explicitly explored ambivalence in authentic social worker–user interactions within multistakeholder contexts.

This article investigates ambivalence in ‘institutional talks’ (Drew & Heritage, 1992) within activation, that is, *the street-level delivery of active labour market policies (ALMPs) aimed at the unemployed*. ALMPs specifically target groups that are disadvantaged in the competitive labour market, such as people with problems in addition to unemployment and those whom employers consider risky to hire (Frøyland et al., 2019). Young peoples’ transition to work is increasingly associated with complexity and de-linearisation (Furlong et al., 2006). This article analyses activation encounters in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) between counsellors and unemployed young adults (18–29 years) with health and/or social problems. The article seeks to answer the following questions: (1) *When is ambivalence present in the social worker–user interactions of this study?* (2) *How do interactions unfold when ambivalence is present?* (3) *What positions do participants take in such interactions?*

Understanding ambivalence in activation encounters

Social work literature conceptualises ambivalence as a psychological mechanism that requires close attention from social workers (Shulman, 2012; Trevithick, 2018). Shulman (2012) urges social workers to explore ambivalence in clients, as unresolved ambivalence may lead to resistance and obstruct change. Trevithick (2018) encourages workers to consciously reflect on their own unresolved emotions to prevent transferring ambivalence within the social worker–client relationship. While social work literature associates ambivalence with tension and the need for resolution, psychological research highlights also functional aspects of ambivalence. For example, in cases of uncertainty, fostering ambivalence is a means for self-protection, especially when failure to obtain a goal (e.g. employment) may negatively affect one’s self-view (Reich & Wheeler, 2016).

Research has drawn attention to structurally conditioned ambivalence in social work, by increasingly focusing on the impact of contextual conditions on street-level delivery of activation policies (Caswell, 2020; Gjersøe, 2021; Haglund, 2016; Hauss, 2014; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013; van Berkel, 2020). Activation takes place within context configurations of politics, governance, organisation and occupation, and involves ‘normative pulls’ (van Berkel, 2020), which is

the essence of sociological ambivalence (Merton & Barber, 1976). Ashforth et al. (2014) describe four main responses to ambivalence in organisational settings, including *avoidance* (low focus on conflicting orientations towards a target of ambivalence), *domination* (of one orientation), *compromise* (between conflicting orientations) and *holism* (exploring both orientations).

In this article, I argue that ambivalence plays a role in how activation policy interacts with target groups. My argument is based on an analysis of audio-recordings of face-to-face encounters in NAV. Activation encounters in NAV have rarely been subject to interactional analyses (Riis-Johansen et al., 2018). In general, SLB research rarely includes frontline interactions in their analyses and has so far paid limited attention to the service user as co-producer of policy (Caswell, 2020; Senghaas et al., 2019). A knowledge gap exists regarding interactions between young adults and welfare services (Aaltonen et al., 2017). That said, previous research has provided important knowledge about how policy goals, such as labour market participation, are talked about and negotiated in street-level interactions (e.g. Caswell, 2020; Danneris, 2018; Danneris & Dall, 2017; Flinkfeldt, 2017; Solberg, 2017). Some of this research indicates that ambivalence is present when activation options are discussed. For example, Danneris and Dall (2017) found that both clients and SLBs express more or less belief that employment is a realistic goal. Caswell (2020) identified that, in Danish Job Centres, users decline concrete job options with a 'yes, but' design that signify agreement-disagreement. While these studies do not explicitly link this inconsistent behaviour to ambivalence, young adults in activation trajectories have reported simultaneous feelings of 'hope' and 'doubt' (Aaltonen et al., 2017), which is a typical feature of ambivalence. Research shows that, when SLBs face indecisive clients, they may turn to legal frameworks to persuade clients into work-related activities (Gjersøe, 2021; Senghaas et al., 2019). However, decision-making does not occur in a vacuum. Research has shown that contextual and relational factors are significant, such as type of activation approach (Frøyland et al., 2019) and dynamics between the professional approach and the level of agency expressed by users (Djuve & Kavli, 2015). This study focuses specifically on how SLBs and users discuss possible 'next steps' in activation, such as employment, work training measures, education and disability pension, and whether and how these steps trigger ambivalence. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, to expand the understanding of ambivalence in social work by examining it as something that occurs within a specific context and relationship. Second, to expand the knowledge of how ambivalence, as related to 'next steps', is interactionally handled and to discuss the implications for social work and the realisation of activation policy.

Theory on social interaction

I use a theoretical framework offered by Goffman (1981) to explain how social workers and users use speech positions and precautionary strategies to express and respond to ambivalence. Goffman (1981) describes three speaker positions (footings) in a social interaction. The *animator* cites what others have said/written; the *author* paraphrases others; and the *principal* expresses a personal view on a matter (Clayman, 1992; Motallebzadeh et al., 2018). These positions give room for manoeuvring. Speakers who go from reproducing others' opinions to expressing a personal viewpoint signal 'a change in the adjustment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we control the production or reception of an utterance' (Goffman, 1981, p. 128). Such shifts often involve precautionary strategies. For example, a social worker who conveys 'face-threatening' information (e.g. sanctioning possibilities) is likely to prefer the animator or author position. In this way, a social distance is created between the speaker and the content of the utterance. Further, by using 'we', the speaker projects intersubjectivity onto the social worker–user relationship or signals no sole responsibility for the utterance. Based on such precautionary strategies, interactional challenges can be avoided.

Goffman's framework is highly relevant to this study. First, Ashforth et al. (2014) emphasise that ambivalence involves several positions on behalf of the actor. Goffman's framework provides an

analytical lens for identifying such positions. Second, Lipsky (1980/2010) refers to SLBs as ‘authors of politics’ (p. 212), as their interpretation of political goals constitutes politics in practice. Goffman’s author position precisely implies a modification of objectives and guidelines given by others.

Norwegian activation context

Norway represents a social democratic welfare model (Esping-Andersen, 1990) where the state is the main welfare provider in life events such as illness, disability and unemployment. Norwegian labour market and welfare policies aim to facilitate a well-functioning labour market with as many as possible participating in the workforce and ensure income for citizens who are permanently or for a limited period unable to work. NAV is responsible for implementing policies through integrated services that are responsive to both policy goals, the legal framework of NAV, and the needs of service users. The Norwegian activation paradigm is characterised by social and human investments, including job counselling, competence building measures and medical and rehabilitation measures (Minas, 2014). People under the age of 30 are politically prioritised, partly due to high drop-out rates in upper secondary school and increasing reception of health- and disability-related benefits among young people (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). Compared with OECD averages, young unemployed Norwegians face relatively favourable labour market conditions and have access to comprehensive public support systems (OECD, 2018). However, recent research shows that the NAV reform from 2006, emphasising integrated policy areas and legislation has not significantly changed the welfare paths of ‘vulnerable’ young people. On the contrary, it appears that the post-reform cohort, compared with the pre-reform cohort, has had weaker bonds to the labour market and more often are found in unproductive and marginalised paths (van der Wel et al., 2021). To integrate disadvantaged groups into the labour market, Frøyland et al. (2019) argues for a combination of supply side, demand side and combined workplace-oriented approaches, while Gjersøe (2021) advocates for a ‘re-specialisation’ of integrated agencies such as NAV, including specialisation on age-related challenges and service needs.

Methods and materials

This study is based on data from a development project that aimed to improve the quality of NAV’s services and secure labour market participation for unemployed users (18–30 years) with ‘risk’ of labour market marginalisation (Bø-Rygg & Oltedal, 2017). Risk included problem combinations, such as unemployment, isolation, low formal qualifications due to learning difficulties and/or school drop-out, and physical and mental health problems. By meeting these criteria, users in the target group were invited to participate in the project, and a total of 110 service users across two NAV offices received follow-up service between 2013 and 2016. The project context involved extra time resources, specialised user-knowledge and assessment tools that supplemented the standard of Work Capability Assessment. This study involves 23 of the project participants, 14 females and nine males, with most in their early to mid-20s. Prior to the project, all had been allocated customised and long-term services from NAV (‘specially adjusted effort’), which includes a wide range of services, including work ability testing, work training, education, and medical treatment and rehabilitation. While the majority had a medical diagnosis that made them eligible for work assessment allowance, which is conditional on work-related activity, some were merely receiving social assistance benefits. Three of the users had a drug addiction. Some were relatively new to NAV, while others had received services for several years, however, without a significant change in their unemployment status. Of the six counsellors in this study, four were educated as social workers, one as a police officer and one as a teacher. In this article, I refer to all six as social workers due to the project profile highlighting social work values and knowledge, such as emphasis on user voice and holistic assessments (Bø-Rygg & Oltedal, 2017).

The data were collected in 2015 and encompass transcribed recordings of 23 counsellor–user encounters totalling nearly 17 h of recordings (with an average of 44 min per encounter). A researcher was present during all encounters. At the time of data collection, all social worker–user pairs had met on several previous occasions. Written consent was obtained from all participants after being informed about the study’s purpose, participants’ rights and research ethics. The Norwegian Social Science Data Service has approved the study.

Analysis

I applied grounded theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with a mix of in-vivo codes and theoretical concepts to initially code conversation topics and performances (e.g. digital job search). Through constant comparisons of codes, I identified that ambivalence was a recurring feature. Ambivalence was often expressed through a ‘yes, but’ design, but ambivalence was also projected onto the interaction in more subtle ways and over longer sequences. In the axial coding, by analysing under what conditions ambivalence emerged, it became clear that ambivalence was specifically prominent when possible activation options were discussed. On this basis, I applied Goffman’s (1981) theory on speaker positions (*animator, author, principal*) in interactions where ambivalence was present. Next, I used the typology developed by Ashforth et al. (2014) to identify responses to ambivalence (*avoidance, domination, compromise, holism*). In analysing the interrelatedness between expressions and responses to ambivalence, I further identified relational aspects of ambivalence, for example, that ambivalence sometimes was transferred within the relationship.

The excerpts presented in the findings section have been selected because they demonstrate tendencies across the dataset. Users’ names are anonymised, and counsellors are referred to as C (1–6).

Findings

The analysis revealed three ‘ambivalent’ interactional tracks. Track A revealed ambivalence *in both parties* in relation to *employment and education*. Track B revealed ambivalence *in counsellors* in relation to *disability pension*. Track C revealed ambivalence *in users* in relation to *work-orientated measures*.

(A) ‘Putting employment and education on hold’

In this track, users displayed ambivalence when employment and education was discussed generally (Caswell, 2020), while counsellors expressed ambivalence when options were addressed more concretely. Counsellors usually addressed employment as a long-term rather than short-time goal, which presupposed ‘absence of disease’ and work experience and, hence, was realised ‘step by step’. The users’ ambivalence appeared as an intrapersonal conflict between the desire to have a job and the fear of not mastering it. However, a closer analysis revealed that many were caught between a cultural expectation of an adult life with a ‘dream job’ and financial independence from the family and state, and low coping beliefs due to previous negative coping experiences. When users revealed a dream job and simultaneously expressed low belief that this job was achievable, counsellors suggested a work-training measure (WM)¹ as a ‘grey’ compromise (Ashforth et al., 2014) that could serve as a first step towards employment, thus recognising the user’s conflicting orientation.

The users in this study were categorised as eligible for long-term service due to ‘reduced work capability’. This categorisation seemed to impact the interaction, as counsellors and users often aligned with the premise that ‘impaired work capability’ was incompatible with labour market participation. Not surprisingly, when users with rather complex problems reported a concrete job opportunity, counsellors felt ambivalent. Counsellors’ ambivalence was expressed through a shift from the principal position, where they conveyed support, to the animator or author position, where they argued for why work was not a realistic goal for the user at this specific stage. The following illustrates how one counsellor’s ambivalence manifested. The excerpt involves Brit, who had

just reported a three-hour-a-week job offer and asked for the counsellor's opinion. The counsellor's initial response had been supportive ('That's great!'). However, when Brit announced that she also wanted to apply for another part-time job, the counsellor conveyed reservations:

- C1: We know you're struggling with [health issues]. Maybe it's enough to start with three hours of work a week? The job is very exciting, and I think it will suit you.
- Brit: Yes, I hope it will because I really want it [the job], and then I have ...
- C1: [The counsellor interrupts] Yes, and he [the employer] knows you, and knows what you are struggling with what challenges you have?
- Brit: Yes, he knows me well.

Brit's sudden decision to begin working seemed to challenge the counsellor's perception of her work capability, as over time, Brit had struggled with mental and physical health problems and was also awaiting surgery. The counsellor pointed out rather quickly negative consequences if Brit accepted the offer without the employer being aware of her health challenges. Hence, the counsellor signalled low faith in both Brit's work capability and the employer's recruitment procedures. However, the counsellor exercised interactional caution by using the term 'we' to establish intersubjectivity on the normative assumption that 'ill health' is incompatible with employment.

Similar responses of simultaneous support and concern were found in other encounters. For example, when Wilhelm reported that his aunt could 'put in a good word' for him regarding a vacancy at her workplace, the discussion proceeded from the relevant vacancy to the option of Wilhelm instead should participate in a WM in a sheltered business. Here, the user and counsellor evaluate the user's work capability quite differently, wherein the counsellor bases her evaluation on the standard work capability assessment. This exemplifies how the 'burden of proof' may work against the user regarding whether employment is seen as a realistic option. In Brit's case, after the counsellor highlighted her health challenges, the second job opportunity was excluded from the conversation, and even though Brit confirmed that the new employer was aware of her health challenges, the counsellor continued to problematise the first job offer:

- C1: Last time we talked, you told me you got up in the morning, but then you just sat on your couch, not being active or doing anything?
- Brit: That's right.
- C1: But now you say you will take that job, three hours a week? Do you think you can handle it with your health challenges?
- Brit: Yes, I still have pains and all that, but the stomach pain is gone [and] my energy is at its peak really.

Earlier in the encounter, Brit had emphasised positive aspects of the job, such as working hours in the afternoons and doing something she could master and enjoy. These aspects were clearly attractive to her and boosted her job motivation. Her one-sided positive orientation, however, seemed to trigger the counsellor into emphasising potential negative aspects. This was done in a caring but persuasive way. When the encounter was coming to an end, Brit's counsellor summarised the further course of action:

- C1: Now it's surgery first, right? There is no point in a [WM] now, you must wait until you get well.
- Brit: No?
- C1: And if you get that job, you do not need a [WM].
- Brit: No, but for my part, I could participate in a measure later.
- C1: Yes, later.
- Brit: Depending on my health, because not everyone gets well after surgery.
- C1: No.

Here, we see that Brit slightly changed her point of view. Her job motivation was replaced with a more deterministic stance where she considered the possibility of not recovering. In and through interactions, counsellors and users developed a common understanding about potential risks of a 'preliminary' entry into the labour market. This illustrates how counsellors' problematisations about users' health or coping abilities may lead to users confirming, and even internalising,

health-related job reservations. Hence, discussions concerning specific job opportunities involved a transfer of ambivalence, which can contribute to moving users away instead of towards the labour market.

Regarding education, counsellors and users displayed ambivalence in a more moderate manner compared to when discussing employment. Most users expressed both 'a want' for education and an uncertainty about their mastery capabilities and practical issues involved. Counsellors acknowledged that education is vital to labour market participation but also signalled uncertainty about the user's capabilities, especially related to standard educational programmes. The following exemplifies the interaction track associated with education, highlighting the user's ambivalent orientation:

- C3: You have decided that you want [upper secondary school], and now the question is who is responsible for funding, right?
 Irene: Yes, and they have suggested [assessment of prior experiential learning].
 C3: Exactly.
 Irene: But I do not feel ready for self-study.
 C3: No.
 Irene: That's the problem.
 C3: Mm, but you still want schooling?
 Irene: Yes [...] but I do not feel ready to study on my own.
 C3: Yes, I see.

Irene expressed a desire to obtain a vocational certificate as a health professional. She had contacted a private provider of vocational training, who had informed her that the formal assessment would be based on her previous learning and work experiences. This required Irene to prepare through self-study. She expressed low faith that she would succeed without the counsellor following up. The counsellor's response can be characterised as *avoidance*, that is, not dealing directly with or even acknowledging ambivalence. In general, counsellors were open about their limited knowledge regarding the education system and that they were dependent on other services to take proper action. However, the counsellors encouraged users to contact – or even offered to contact on the user's behalf – a career guidance centre or training office. In this way, concrete decisions and actions regarding the educational option were put on hold or postponed.

(B) *'Negotiating the pros and cons of disability pension'*

In three encounters, the users suggested disability pension as a possible option. This seemed to trigger strong ambivalence in the counsellors. In these cases, health experts had already documented that the user's ability to work was significantly impaired. However, the available documentation did not provide a clear answer as to whether or how much the users were able to work. Counsellors' ambivalence involved tensions between the professional value of self-determination and, at the same time, normative views of disability pension and uncertainty of case procedures. In this track, counsellors expressed ambivalence through rapid shifts between the animator, the author and the principal positions. The following illustrates how a user took an active role in negotiating the counsellor's reservations. Pia, who was in her late 20s, had had somatic and mental health problems all her adult life. In her nine-year contact with NAV, she had participated in several WMs and had started but not completed upper secondary school. Pia now argued that a disability pension would ensure a steady income and life situation, which she believed would help her achieve her educational goal. The counsellor responded by conveying reservations about the disability pension:

- C4: When I was new [in the counsellor role], I was very unsure of my role, right? So, I felt ...
 Pia: [Pia interrupts] You felt it was like giving up on me, I think?
 C4: Yes, that too, but also regarding how to prepare such a case [disability pension], how I should build it up, professionally, on the basis that I lacked experience.
 Pia: Yes, I did not think about that.
 C4: No, it was in my head, 'Oh, how do I do that?'

Pia took an exploratory approach when she suggested that the counsellor's previous avoidance of the disability option involved not giving up on her. The counsellor confirmed Pia's interpretation

but also revealed that a lack of knowledge was a major cause for not proceeding with a disability pension application earlier. This suggests that counsellors' uncertainties about case procedures may impede users' disability pension rights. The three encounters where disability pension was discussed involved users who saw no other option, and they argued that a pension would increase their autonomy and financial security. This viewpoint was challenged by the counsellors:

- C4: So, some of my concern about disability pension – when I think not only of you but also in general – being 28 years old and getting a disability benefit and not being in an everyday activity. How do you think it will work for you? Will it be better for you?
- Pia: I see it as a solution really. For 10 years I have been in a situation that I have been discontent with [...] There are a lot of people involved in decisions about me, and I do not think my situation has improved.
- C4: Yes, but [...] you must try all possible alternatives before applying for a disability pension.
- Pia: If that's the goal, I've already done it, many times.
- C4: It is also possible to work a certain percentage. Working full time is not for everyone?
- Pia: No, I really don't know how to answer to that.

Counsellors shifted between different positions towards the disability pension option. They simultaneously explored how a disability pension was a preferred alternative for the user, *and* associated a disability pension with inactivity and long-term negative consequences.

In addition, they stressed institutional requirements, such as adequate testing of work capability. Users went into a negotiation mode when counsellors expressed a 'mixed' orientation. They used the animator or author position to refer to medical assessments that concluded with a significant reduction in their work ability. By 'citing' or 'paraphrasing' health specialists, the users strengthened their position as a rights holder vis-a-vis the national social security system. Although these negotiations seemed to give counsellors an increased understanding of how a pension could better a user's life situation, they nevertheless argued for 'a grey compromise' (Ashforth et al., 2014), such as a WM or a graded pension that would allow for a part-time job. The users declined these suggestions while at the same time expressing disappointment about their reduced work capability. This allowed them to present themselves as motivated but prevented from working due to conditions outside their control (Flinkfeldt, 2017). For Pia, negotiations in fact ended with preparations for a disability pension application.

(C) 'A pull towards work-oriented measures'

Track C involved a counsellor who suggested a WM and a user who responded with strong ambivalence. Users expressed ambivalence through a 'yes, but' design. In the principal position, users sympathised with the suggestion (e.g. 'Sure, at least a WM will give me something to do'), while in the author position, they conveyed reservations. The following exemplifies how a user expressed ambivalence and how the counsellor responded:

- C6: What are your thoughts about [work training]?
- Yvonne: I can try, but I'm afraid that if I thrive there and want to continue working there, and they can't hire me permanently, then I must start all over again.
- C6: Is that what you're thinking?
- Yvonne: Yes.
- C6: In my view, you get work experience, which is valuable [...] you can put it on your CV, which will count when you apply for a job later.
- Yvonne: Yes.
- C6: And work training is the measure which we see gives the best effect in terms of getting a job.

Through an almost imperceptible adjustment of position, Yvonne was able to display a personal motivation in line with normative expectations of labour market participation and at the same time convey reservations linked to exterior conditions ('[The employer] cannot hire me permanently', i.e. 'So what is the point?'). The users participating in this study seemed, in general, reluctant to believe that a WM would lead to employment, and some would refer to facts concerning WMs' ineffectiveness, such as Jens, who explicitly referred to statistics that spoke against participating in a WM, thus placing him in an animator position.

Users who stressed a negative orientation towards WMs were met with persuasion. For example, counsellors argued that, even if a WM did not result in a permanent job, it would increase the user's employability. Such claims, however, seemed to challenge users' personal experiences. Those who had previously participated in a WM and experienced negative mastery or no concrete outcome (such as acquisition of profession-specific skills) were particularly sceptical. However, when counsellors encouraged users to reflect on the positive consequences of a WM in a broader sense, the users usually ended up agreeing that WMs may generate other outcomes, such as general work skills. Users who emphasised a positive orientation (with few reservation) to WMs were met with a more exploratory approach by their counsellor:

- C6: You do not dread [participating in] a measure?
 Tone: No, I both dread it *and* look forward to it.
 C6: Yes, it is exciting too?
 Tone: Yes.
 C6: Like, what it [WM] involves, and where, and who else is there, and there are always things to consider when one is starting with something new?
 Tone: Yes, there are many things to get acquainted with.

This approach allowed users to reflect on potential conflicting feelings involved in starting something new, which is the core of a *holism response to ambivalence*. However, a holism response was rare in this study, and although this track involved some exploration, a convincing behaviour was a prominent feature in counsellors, with meagre attention paid to users' reservations. This behaviour can be defined as a *domination response to ambivalence*.

To sum up the findings, ambivalence occurred and was handled along three interaction tracks. Track A involved 'putting employment and education on hold', and in some cases, a 'push away' from the labour market; Track B involved negotiations on disability pensions, which allowed for an exit from activation, and Track C implied 'a pull towards' WMs.

Discussion

This study set out to explore ambivalence in social worker–user interactions in a multistakeholder context. It aimed to (i) expand the understanding of ambivalence by investigating it as situated and relational, and (ii) expand the knowledge of how ambivalence is interactionally handled. The findings show that ambivalence posed an interactional challenge and was responded to in multiple ways which have implications for social work and the realisation of activation policy.

Regarding the first aim, the presence of ambivalence was structurally and relationally conditioned. Furlong et al. (2006) emphasise that young people who experience complex, nonlinear transitions to work are often socially and educationally disadvantaged. The users participating in this study experienced synergy effects of several variables, including a disadvantaged class position, unusual line of life events at a young age, such as health problems, and low formal qualifications due to negative mastery in previous schooling. On this basis, they received long-term service from NAV and were included into a development project wherein they were considered 'at risk' of labour market marginalisation (Bø-Rygg & Oltedal, 2017). However, the findings of this study suggest that their marginalised position was maintained, despite project characteristics of small caseloads, extra time-resources and specialised knowledge regarding the target group. These characteristics have been associated with increased opportunity for tailored service (Gjersøe, 2021). Users' ambivalence was specifically prominent when counsellors asked them about 'the dream job', expressed through a discrepancy between dreams and aspirations versus low mastery beliefs and reservations. This combination of 'hope' and 'doubt' corresponds with how other marginalised young adults orient themselves towards work and education in activation trajectories (Aaltonen et al., 2017). However, it is conceivable that people with several negative coping experiences promote ambivalence as a self-protection strategy against potential failure, or even from exposure (Reich & Wheeler, 2016). However, users' display of 'mixed feelings' were not constant, and they showed

varying degrees of motivation for activation options. These individual differences were largely overlooked by counsellors, and the solutions to users' unemployment status were surprisingly similar (a combination of medical treatment/rehabilitation and WMs).

Lipsky (1980/2010) describes how structural cross-pressure can make SLBs develop coping strategies such as creaming and service routinisation. Hauss (2014) has shown how structural tensions relating to new rationales of ALMPs and traditional notions of helping may result in a 'creaming effect' (Lipsky, 1980/2010) where young people with poor prospects are 'left hanging' in the social security safety. Regarding routinisation, WMs are often used in Norwegian activation work with users who experience complex obstacles to employment, even though several evaluations have questioned the effectiveness of WMs in terms of transition to work (OECD, 2018). However, employment and disability pensions represent the main exits from activation, and the counsellors in this study displayed strong ambivalence to both exits. From a policy perspective, employment is considered the overall goal, while disability benefit is considered a last resort. Moreover, realisation of a disability pension is time-consuming and resource-intensive and requires extensive knowledge of legislation and case processing rules. Disability benefits may therefore become a non-preferred alternative in the NAV context. Counsellors' ambivalence towards concrete job opportunities seems more mysterious. Counsellors' job reservations on users' behalf can be more or less conscious, triggered by 'normative pulls' in the context figuration of their work (van Berkel, 2020). Contextual factors, such as few relevant vacancies in the local labour market and a rather narrow supply-side approach to activation, i.e. investments that target the jobless rather than employers or labour market demands (Frøyland et al., 2019), may also play a role in maintaining marginalised transitions to work for already 'disadvantaged' young adults. Frøyland et al. (2019) describe how different approaches to labour market integration are based on different assumptions, for example by viewing work as a right or a duty; by viewing reduced work capability as an individual failure or as a gap between capabilities and demands; and by viewing employers and the labour market as transformable or fixed.

If investments are unilaterally aimed at the unemployed without a focus on employers and labour market conditions, it is conceivable that the counsellors promote job ambivalence on behalf of users to protect them against high labour market demands and potential failure. Fossetøl (2019) has demonstrated the great responsibility that social workers feel for users and that this sense of responsibility is an important but silenced part of their professionalism. Nevertheless, a protective approach in activation may become problematic if social workers are unconscious of, or undercommunicate, their 'other concern' and persuade instead of exploring with the user when deciding on a next step. This behaviour may also 'blur' structural and age-related barriers to labour market integration. Hence, this points to how self-awareness, or the ability to recognise and name one's own feelings and behaviour (Trevithick, 2018), is crucial to maintain social work values of self-determination and social justice.

Regarding the study's second aim, the *dominance response* – exaggerating one orientation so that it overwhelms the other (Ashforth et al., 2014) – was a common response among counsellors for handling ambivalence when a concrete job or a disability pension was discussed. In such cases, counsellors suggested WMs as a 'grey compromise' (Ashforth et al., 2014) to safeguard both the employment goal and the user's disability status in the NAV system. In this way, WMs functioned as buffers against both exits. The domination response is a coping strategy in circumstances where the actor is accountable to others and needs a reassuring justification to bolster the choice (Ashforth et al., 2014), which are characteristics of the NAV counsellor role. Social workers are both mediators and negotiators (Healy, 2014) and expected to balance opposite imperatives such as standardisation and responsiveness in their work (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Previous research has identified that 'persuasive methods' is effective for achieving user compliance (Haglund, 2016; Senghaas et al., 2019), that is, user behaviour that complies with institutional requirements. In moving service users from passivity into activity (WMs), the domination response was productive; however, it was counterproductive for the goal of labour market integration, as users in some cases were 'persuaded

away' from concrete job opportunities. This counsellor behaviour challenges both the policy goal of job inclusion and social work values of self-determination and social justice (Healy, 2014).

Conclusion and directions for future research

Due to the small sample and project context of the study, the findings cannot be generalised to the everyday practice of NAV. The theoretical contribution of the study, however, indicates a connection between how ambivalence is interactionally handled and the decisions and outcomes of activation processes. Echoing Fossetøl (2019), this analytical result has the potential for generalisation. Goffman's framework has made visible an extensive shift in 'footings' as a means for dealing with ambivalence. The counsellors' behaviours seem related to tension in the context figuration of their work (Healy, 2014; Lipsky, 1980/2010; van Berkel, 2020). Moreover, by using Goffman's framework, I have shown that users take a more explicit bargaining position when discussing the disability pension option versus specific job offers. This may illustrate the presence of a supply-side approach (Frøyland et al., 2019) wherein a rights holder position vis-a-vis the labour market is weaker than in combined approaches to activation.

This study fills a research gap by examining ambivalence in 'institutional talks' (Drew & Heritage, 1992). It contributes knowledge about how unresolved ambivalence at the structural and individual levels of activation may steer young adults with complex needs into 'waiting rooms' of the welfare state. The findings thus add to previous research identifying that activation sometimes means users remain in temporary solutions and/or move away from the labour market (Danneris, 2018; Danneris & Dall, 2017; Hauss, 2014). Future research could investigate whether and to what extent social workers and users in welfare states with other designs, such as liberal or conservative (Esping-Andersen, 1990), handle ambivalence when activation options are discussed within the relationship. It may, for example, be plausible that users in Norway, a social democratic welfare system characterised by universalism, have a stronger rights-holder position and sense of agency over social insurance rights than in other countries. Research has further shown that people may go through different stages in their unemployment trajectories (Danneris, 2018; Furlong et al., 2006). The findings of this study are linked to a specific moment in time and cannot claim long-term implications. A suggestion for future research is hence to study how ambivalence is present and handled in social worker–user interactions over longer time spans, wherein de-linearity and fragmentation in life events and their consequences for users may be explored.

Note

1. Work-oriented measures refer here to work-training activities in ordinary or sheltered businesses.

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