SW&S | Social Work and Society
International Online Journal

On the frontline of the welfare service state: any possibilities for a practice of citizenship?

Urban Nothdurfter, Free University of Bozen/Bolzano

1   Introduction: The shift towards active service-oriented welfare states

European welfare states have seen a broad shift from a focus on social security to a focus on the ideas of activation and social investment (Weishaupt, 2010; Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Hemerijck 2017). Although these ideas have been taken up differently in diverse welfare state contexts, there has been a broad convergence on a programmatic which shows as its common features the departure from a 'one size fits all' welfare state towards more individualized and conditional forms of welfare state intervention, the importance of welfare service provision and increased lower-level discretion in policy development and implementation (Sabatinelli, 2010; Graziano, 2012; Minas et al., 2012; Lister, 2013; Bergmark et al. 2017).

Social investment ideas rely on a productivist understanding of welfare state intervention and advocate the reallocation of social expenditure from social protection towards capacitating services in order to foster employment and productivity in the knowledge-based postindustrial economy (Hemerijck, 2017; Jenson, 2017). The paradigm of activation emphasizes the notion of the active citizen who shall be both responsible and able to perform economic self-reliance and a succeeding life conduct, first and foremost through labor market participation (Weishaupt, 2010). In general, the core aim of activation policies is the tightening of options for labor market exit and conditions for the receipt of benefits as well as the removal of individual barriers to employment. Accordingly, they combine demanding and enabling elements with policy instruments. Demanding elements are related to the duration and level of benefits, more restrictive eligibility criteria, increased conditionality and sanctions for non-compliance. The enabling side of activation is given by job search assistance and counselling services, employer subsidies, in-work benefits and training schemes. Although most of these measures can be seen as instruments of active labor market policy, taken together they stand for a fundamental realignment of welfare state intervention in the paradigm of activation (Eichhorst et al., 2010). In many contexts these tendencies brought about a much stronger emphasis on the marketization and individualization of welfare service provision (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011; van Berkel et al., 2011; Lister, 2013; Clarke, 2018).

From a critical point of view it can be stated that finding employment, even in the face of adverse structural conditions, becomes the responsibility of the individual, whose entitlement to benefits has to be deserved and depends on conformity with disciplinary conditions imposed. Work or rather the willingness to work has become a symbol for the norm of having to become active and 'enterprising' in all situations of social adversity (Breitkreuz & Willamson, 2012; Lorenz, 2018).

The emphasis on the individualized provision of welfare services has to be contextualized in the light of the ideas about the role of the welfare state and the proprieties and strategies of its interventions. It is against this background, that European welfare states have extended their

service provision component, relying on people changing approaches and technologies in order to strengthen and mobilize personal skills and capacities (Bonvin et al., 2018a). Capacitating service provision is seen as the vital component within the activation paradigm and the social investment perspective at the expense of policies to reduce poverty and inequality, as critical contributions have shown (Bonoli et al, 2017).

2   Implications to social citizenship

But which are the implications of these shifts to social citizenship? The social dimension of citizenship developed hand in hand with the emergence of the welfare state and the introduction of social security schemes, redistributive benefits, cash entitlements and social services. However, social citizenship is not entirely enshrined in a fixed set of guaranteed rights but necessarily involves shared convictions, values and civic practices that recalibrate and concretize citizenship rights and duties (Evers & Guillemard, 2013; Clarke, 2018).

During the last decades, social citizenship has been reframed first and foremost in terms of choices and opportunities available to the individual citizens. This emphasize on the active dimension of citizenship while weakening (and depreciating) its so-called passive dimension of rights and entitlements, represents a significant shift from a more solidaristic notion of citizenship to a more individualistic one (Gilbert, 2013; Clarke, 2018). This turn in conceptualizing citizenship can be interpreted and labelled very differently, depending on which ideas are highlighted. Critical observers, however, have pointed out not only the increasing conditionality but also an increasing moralization of welfare and, in this sense, a turn towards an ambiguous pedagogical programmatic of the welfare service state (Fletcher & Flint, 2018).

These shifts and recalibrations of citizenship rights and duties must be understood as a political and governmental project of remaking the relations between the state and its citizens, which increasingly differentiate the population and apply different practices to different 'target groups' (Clarke, 2018). Clarke (2018) associates these tendencies with the political project that is based on the neoliberal self-fulfilling prophecy of welfare no longer being affordable. Thus, welfare has been shifted from welfare to workfare, becoming more conditional and relying on responsibilization and disciplinary action towards citizens as benefit claimants and service users. These shifts in welfare state intervention have also led to new organizational arrangements for the governance and delivery of welfare services. Tendencies of marketization and privatization of welfare services have made for more complex organizational landscapes at the edges of the state while processes of the devolution of rescaling have increased lower-level discretion and localized forms of welfare strategies, arrangements and provisions (van Berkel et al., 2011; Clarke 2018).

In this sense, the future of citizenship is at stake also in the ambivalences that emerge from the emphasis on the active dimension of citizenship and from the slippery policy ideas of activation and social investment (Clarke, 2018). As Clarke (2018) points out,

> "large sections of the public continue to look to states to provide protection and support rather than being required to be independent. This remains a site of some tension, not least at the front line of welfare services."

Paradoxically, the changing architecture of welfare services states may make it even harder for citizens to find the state in its welfarist form. Despite the increased emphasis on its service dimension, localized and dispersed forms of governance and interpretation of the welfare state

make it harder to recognize it as such. At the same time, in some circumstances, the state may be all too present, but rather in its demanding and disciplining forms (Clarke 2018).

In any case, shifts in welfare state development and the underlying ideas of aims, priorities and strategies of welfare state intervention have led to an individualization and localization of social citizenship. As Lister points out

> "(t)he 'active' state was contrasted not only with a 'passive' welfare state but also, through the notion of personalization, with a one-size-fits-all welfare state. More personalized forms of delivery, often in partnership with the third and private sectors, spell greater discretion and reduced accountability." (Lister 2013, p. 141).

In this sense, the shift towards active service oriented welfare service states indeed changed the landscapes of citizenship, not only in terms of the recalibration of rights and duties in policy as written, but also in policy as performed, or as van Berkel puts it, by "a process of localization (municipalization) and individualization of citizenship" (van Berkel 2011, p. 214).

Recognizing the concretization of social citizenship through policy as performed makes it necessary to take interactions and practices on the frontline of active service-oriented welfare states better into account, especially in services implementing active labor and social assistance policies, as well as to highlight constraints and possibilities for practices of citizenship in these contexts.

3   The role of frontline work

In this sense, frontline work in activation services assumes a crucial role in determining and negotiating what social citizenship eventually and really means for citizens in their role(s) as service users, benefit recipients and 'targets' of activation and social investment.

The awareness that frontline work matters has been reflected by a growing body of literature based on studies which take a look at the frontline of local welfare and employment services (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; van Berkel et al., 2017). The literature on activating labor market and social policy discusses the importance of the operational side of such policies and addresses the role of frontline work in policy implementation and service delivery. Different scholars have emphasized the impact and consequences that the shift towards activation has had on the frontline delivery of employment and social policies and on the nature of welfare interactions between frontline practitioners and service users, pointing out that these interactions are increasingly founded on interventions aimed at ensuring or changing individual behavior, attitudes and compliance. In this context, the role of frontline work has been considerably transformed and raises new questions about its political, normative and ethical implications as well as on occupational groups and professional competences to be involved (van Berkel, 2017; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2019; Caswell, 2019).

Much of this work is informed by Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach, which highlights the dilemmas of work in public services and the use of discretion in the street-level implementation of policies (Lipsky, 2010). The revival of this approach must be seen against the background of the shift towards welfare service states with their emphasis on individualized service provision and the interactive encounter between the welfare state and its citizens. Critical street-level research is also informed by a governmentality perspective that outlines the connection between questions of power and subjectivity and shows how

activation as part of a political and governmental project works through responsibilization as a strategy for external and self-control. In this context, frontline work plays a crucial role in the reproduction of activated subjectivities, aligning social relations and identities with the ends and means of state intervention (McDonald & Marston, 2005; Penz et al., 2017). As McDonald and Marston point out, case management has become a key technology in governing unemployment,

> "representing a radical localization of governance wherein the rights and responsibilities between unemployed people and the state are articulated primarily in the relationship between the case manager and his or her client" (McDonald & Marston, 2005, p. 374).

Little attention has been given so far to the question of professionalization in activation contexts (van Berkel & van der Aa 2012; Nothdurfter, 2018; Sadeghi and Fekjær, 2019). Professional challenges in these practice fields caught between administrative and social work are only insufficiently addressed. These kind of activities are still conceived very differently and carried out by frontline practitioners with different educational backgrounds and qualifications. However, findings from empirical research on 'activation work' are consistent in acknowledging that street-level workers play an important role in policy implementation and in the street-level delivery of welfare conditionality (van Berkel, 2017; 2019). In this context, the use of discretion by frontline practitioners has an important impact on what arrives as policy on the ground (Evans, 2010; van Berkel, 2017; Evans & Hupe 2020). In this sense, it is still worth looking at what is going on at the frontline of services. The street-level literature makes convincingly clear that looking at frontline practices provides a better picture about the welfare service state including its unsolved issues of paternalism and the disciplinary and surveillance effects of its services (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; van Berkel, 2017; Zacka, 2017). Street-level research also shows that frontline practices are shaped by a complex set of context characteristics referring to policy, governance, organizational and occupational contexts (van Berkel, 2017). Furthermore, street-level research can illustrate how people are treated, which services they can receive or not, which outcomes are striven for, which outcomes can or cannot be realized and how practitioners deal with the challenges at the frontlines of the welfare service state (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; van Berkel, 2017; Zacka, 2017).

Findings from street-level research involving interviews with frontline practitioners in Public Employment Services in Austria and Italy have shown that they often have to prioritize problems and procedures which are in fact not the immediate priorities to the people themselves or simply not realistic short-term goals (Nothdurfter, 2016, 2018). One of the most important aspect of this research was to see, however, how processes of individualization and personalization are at work in relation to frontline practitioners themselves. Getting along with the challenges of their job has been represented as every practitioner's very own business. Even the definition of certain standards, e.g. to act in a supportive way and not to harm clients, seemed to be more of a personal concern rather than part of a shared and explicit professional strategy. These findings clearly show that practitioners are referred to precarious forms of self-reliance in the performance of their job while a collective engagement with the challenges of 'activation work' within the given mandate and as part of a professional approach seemed to be completely missing. This means that the interaction with service users at the frontline of the Public Employment Services strongly depends on practitioners' personal efforts, attitudes and interpretations and on how they position themselves within the tensions of 'activation work'. Interview data have shown that there is hardly any professional framing or discussion of dilemmas and challenges encountered at the street-level. Instead

dealing with challenges and dilemmas becomes a very personal issue of the individual practitioner. Although frontline practitioners play a key role in the context of activation, critical aspects and the handling of challenges are not located and negotiated within the frame of a professional argumentation, but rather shifted to an individual and very personal level. Therefore Activation is at work also at the level of practitioners. They are themselves exposed to the power techniques of individualization and responsibilization under the precarious conditions of managerial control (Nothdurfter, 2016, 2018).

Against this background, questions arise as to what professionalism means in the context of activation and whether and how a professionalization project in these practice fields is feasible or even possible (Nothdurfter, 2016; 2018; Sadeghi and Fekjær, 2019). The lacking debate on the professionalization of 'activation work' might also be due to the fact that such a debate can hardly be addressed abstracting from contextual factors. Different policy and governance frameworks, different organizational solutions and occupational contexts determine what 'activation work' on the street level eventually looks like, how it is designed and by whom it is carried out. Furthermore, there might also be very different ideas about the feasibility of and the possibilities for professionalizing 'activation work' as well as about what referential model and route a professionalization project in this field should take. In this sense, the contours of 'activation work' as a professional practice are still rather unclear.

However, what would be strongly needed in the context of political, normative and ethical implications of frontline work is a debate that lifts the challenges of 'activation work' up from the level of a merely personal endeavor and an individualized use of discretion. Street-level research can contribute to promote a debate about legitimate uses of discretion and about strategies to recapture the question of finding the right balance between capacitating goals and responses to wider social problems as a shared responsibility and as a practice based on accountable standards.

Social work has, hopefully, still to say something in this regard. The social work profession and its struggles with the notion of professionalism can still serve as a referential model for dealing with the difficulties and challenges of working at the frontline of welfare service states. Professional social work has been developed out of its core dilemma to be inevitably linked to social policy with all its impositions, but to strive, at the same time, for a certain degree of critical distance and autonomy based on a separate form of professional knowledge and ethics committed to the needs, as expressed by those who constitute the target groups of social policy (Lorenz, 2006). Such a professionalization project cannot simply follow the path of carving out a detached area of proper technical competence but has to develop a notion of professionalism that engages with policy ideas, organizational structures and practices which determine the constraints and possibilities for a practice of citizenship. That is what qualifies social work as a social profession. As Walter Lorenz points out, a social profession

> "has always yet to be defined in the exact circumstances in which it is being practiced. Perhaps it is appropriately ambiguous because the 'social' is always the space in which ambiguities emerge, get negotiated, give rise to a dominant discourse only to get subverted again. The 'social' is the space that social work always had to negotiate, no matter how much it wanted to get away from this dangerous and insecure intersection of contrary forces and from the firing line of public criticism. But there is no secure place for a profession that has 'the social' as its mandate" (Lorenz 2001: 12).

4   The importance of critical street-level research

Have these ideas about the potential contribution of social work become too normative, too optimistic and outdated? Critical positions would probably agree, perhaps rightly so. The agenda of the active service-oriented welfare state with its impositions seems too often hardly compatible with professional standards and repertories of social work. However, welfare services have become increasingly important and they are, as Clarke (2018) points out, active in the management of the 'social question', even though this social question has become fragile and divided. Welfare state professionals stand at the forefront of these contexts. In this sense, there is a strong need for more theoretical and empirical efforts to relate the micro-level of frontline practice with the macro-level of welfare state development and for promoting critical discussions about the implications and consequences of activation policies to the lives of vulnerable target groups.

Welfare state research has increasingly taken into account the street-level. There has been a growing interest for what is going on there, even though disciplinary and surveillance effects of services remain often the proverbial elephant in the room while cogent theorizing of the renewed institutional, managerial, cognitive and normative aspects of the welfare service state is still largely missing in the debates of comparative welfare research (Bonvin et al., 2018b). In this context, it is especially the role of street-level research in social work to point out the consequences on target groups and on the interactions between frontline practitioners and welfare service users. If the quest is "to find out how to implement not patronizing but really capability-friendly, autonomy enhancing and dignity respecting services" (Bonvin et al., 2018b) research and theorizing on the welfare service state cannot but look at what is going on its street-level frontlines.

During the last 15 years, street-level research has brought about a nuanced debate with a variety of contributions throughout the fields of public administration, social policy and social work. There are common interests and intersections as well as specific characteristics of the street-level debates in these neighboring fields, and the further development of street-level research could benefit from better tying together the perspectives and taking stock of the debates (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). From its very first elaboration by Lipsky the street-level bureaucracy approach has highlighted the very political question of what happens when people get together through institutions to make policy (work) on the ground. In this sense, it remains important to ask what street-level research can eventually contribute to the normative propositions of responsive and accountable processes of policy implementation and of positive outcomes for people in need of institutional responses.

In this context, the notion of citizenship is still a useful lens, in order to understand and to renegotiate who belongs and who is included on the grounds of which criteria and what behavior. In order to critically ask what rights and freedoms to act people have. And in order to understand whether and how frontline work in welfare service states can still promote a participatory dimension of citizenship. A participatory understanding of social citizenship would overcome the dichotomous view of citizens either as passive benefits recipients or as being obliged to be active. Instead, it would recognize them as subjects handling their welfare by being able to choose and live a life they value and by making their voice heard in relation to public services which have become so prominent in the current architecture of the welfare state (Johansson & Hvinden, 2013).

References:

Bergmark, Å., Bäckman, O. & Minas, R. (2017). Organizing local social service measures to counteract long-term social assistance receipt. What works? Experiences from Sweden. *European Journal of Social Work,* 20(4), 548-559.

Betzelt, S. & Bothfeld, S. (eds.) (2011). *Activation and labour market in Europe: Challenges to social citizenship.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bonoli, G., Cantillon, B & van Lancker W. (2017). Social Investment and the Matthew Effect. Limits to a Strategy. In A. Hemerijck (ed.). *The Uses of Social Investment (*pp. 66-76). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bonoli, G. & Natali, D. (eds.) (2012). *The Politics of the New Welfare State.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bonvin, J.-M., Otto, H.-U., Wohlfahrt, A. & Ziegler, H. (2018a). Introduction. Ambivalences of the Rising Welfare Service State – Hopes and Hazard of Modern Welfare Architectures. *Social Work and Society,* 16(2), https://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/561/1108

Bonvin, J.-M., Otto, H.-U., Wohlfahrt, A. & Ziegler, H. (2018b). The Rise of Welfare Service States – Conceptual challenges of an ambiguous welfare settlement and the need for new policy research. *Social Work and Society,* 16(2), https://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/585/1132

Breitkreuz, R. S. & Williamson, D. L. (2012). The self-sufficiency trap: A critical examination of welfare-to-work. *Social Service Review*, 86(4), 660–689.

Brodkin, E. Z. & Marston, G. (eds.) (2013). *Work and the Welfare State: Street-Level Organizations and Workfare Politics.* Washington: Georgetown University Press.

Caswell, D. (2019). Talking policy into being—How street-level bureaucrats and vulnerable unemployed talk about labor market participation. European Policy Analysis, early view published 27 September 2019, https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1071

Clarke, J. (2018). Imagining and Practising Citizenship in Austere Times. *Social Work and Society,* 16(2), https://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/567/1114

Eichhorst, W., Kaufmann, O., Konle-Seidl, R. & Reinhard, H.-J. (2010). Bringing the jobless into work? An introduction to activation policies. In W. Eichhorst, O. Kaufmann & R. Konle-Seidl (eds.). *Bringing the jobless into work? Experiences with activation schemes in Europe and the US* (pp. 1–16). Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer.

Evans, T. & Hupe, P. (2020). *Discretion and the Quest for Controlled Freedom*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Evans, T. (2010). *Professional Discretion in Welfare Services*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Evers, A. & Guillemard, A.-M. (eds.) (2013). *Social policy and citizenship: The changing landscape.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fletcher, D. R. & Flint, J. (2018). Welfare conditionality and social marginality: The folly of the tutelary state? *Critical Social Policy,* 38(4), 771–791.

Gilbert, N. (2013). Citizenship in the Enabling State: The Changing Balance of Rights and Obligations. In: A. Evers, A.-M. & Guillemard (eds.). *Social Policy and Citizenship: The Changing Landscape (*pp. 80-96). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Graziano, P. R. (2012). Converging worlds of activation? Activation policies and governance in Europe and the role of the EU. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy,* 32 (5/6), 312–326.

Hemerijck, A. (ed.) (2017). *The Uses of Social Investment.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jenson, J. (2017). Developing and Spreading a Social Investment Perspective: The World Bank and the OECD Compared. In A. Hemerijck (ed.). *The Uses of Social Investment* (pp. 207-215). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johansson, H. & Hvinden, B. (2013). Towards a post-Marshallian framework for the analysis of social citizenship. In A. Evers & A.-M. Guillemard (Eds.), *Social policy and citizenship: The changing landscape* (pp. 35–56).Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lipsky, M. (2010) [1980]. *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services.* 30th anniversary expanded edition, London: Russell Sage.

Lister, R. (2013). Social citizenship in New Labour's new "active" welfare state: The case of the United Kingdom. In A. Evers & A.-M. Guillemard (eds.). *Social policy and citizenship: The changing landscape (*pp. 121-149). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lorenz, W. (2018). Preface. In U. Nothdurfter, U. *Activation in Practice. Constraints and possibilities for (professional) action on the frontline of Public Employment Services (*pp. vii – xi). Bozen/Bolzano: bu,press.

Lorenz, W. (2001). Social work in Europe – Portrait of a diverse professional group. In S. Hessle (Ed.), *International Standard Setting of Higher Social Work Education* (pp. 9-24). Stockholm University, Stockholm.

Lorenz, W. (2006). *Perspectives on European Social Work: From the Birth of the Nation State to the Impact of Globalisation. Opladen* & Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers.

McDonald, C. & Marston, G. (2005). Workfare as welfare: governing unemployment in the advanced liberal state. *Critical Social Policy,* 25(3), 374-401.

Minas, R., Wright, S. & van Berkel, Rik (2012). Decentralization and centralization: Governing the activation of social assistance recipients in Europe. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy,* 32(5/6), 286-298.

Nothdurfter, U. (2018). *Activation in Practice. Constraints and possibilities for (professional) action on the frontline of Public Employment Services.* Bozen/Bolzano: bu,press.

Nothdurfter, U. & Hermans, K. (2018). Meeting (or not) at the street-level? A literature review on street-level research in public management, social policy and social work. *International Journal of Social Welfare,* 27(3), 294-304.

Nothdurfter, U. (2016). The street-level delivery of activation policies: constraints and possibilities for a practice of citizenship. *European Journal of Social Work, 19*(3-4), 420–440.

Penz, O., Sauer, B., Gaitsch, M., Hofbauer, J. & Glinsner, B. (2017). Post-bureaucratic encounters: Affective labour in public employment services. *Critical Social Policy*, 37(4), 540–561.

Sabatinelli, S. (2010). Activation and Rescaling: Interrelated Questions in Social Policy? In Y. Kazepov (ed.). *Rescaling Social Policies towards Multilevel Governance in Europe* (pp. 75-101). Farnham: Ashgate.

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

van Berkel, R. (2019). Making welfare conditional: A street-level perspective. *Social Policy & Administration,* early view published 18 December 2019, https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12564

van Berkel, R. & van der Aa, P. (2012). Activation work: Policy programme administration or professional service provision*? Journal of Social Policy, 41*(3), 493–510.

van Berkel, R. & van der Aa, P. (2012). Activation Work: Policy Programme Administration or Professional Service Provision? *Journal of Social Policy,* 41(3): 493-510.

van Berkel, R. (2011). The local- and street-level production of social citizenship: The case of dutch social assistance. In S. Betzelt & S. Bothfeld (eds.), *Activation and labour market in Europe: Challenges to social citizenship* (pp. 195–217). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

van Berkel, R. (2017). State of the Art in Frontline Studies of Welfare-to-Work: A Literature Review. In R. van Berkel, D. Caswell, P. Kupka, Peter and F. Larsen, Flemming (eds.). *Frontline Delivery of Activation Policies in Europe. Activating the Unemployed* (pp. 12-35). London: Routledge.

van Berkel, R., de Graaf, W. & Sirovatka, T. (eds.) (2011) *The governance of active welfare states in Europe.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Weishaupt, J. T. (2010). *From the Manpower Revolution to the Activation Paradigm: Explaining Institutional Continuity and Change in an Integrating Europe.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Zacka, B. (2017). *When the state meets the street. Public service and moral agency*. Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Author´s Address:
Urban Nothdurfter, Phd
University of Bolzen-Bozano
Faculty of Education
Urban.Nothdurfter2@unibz.it