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## **Lost Agency? Lived Experiences of Social Assistance Recipients in an Activating Welfare State**

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## Motivation and Research Questions

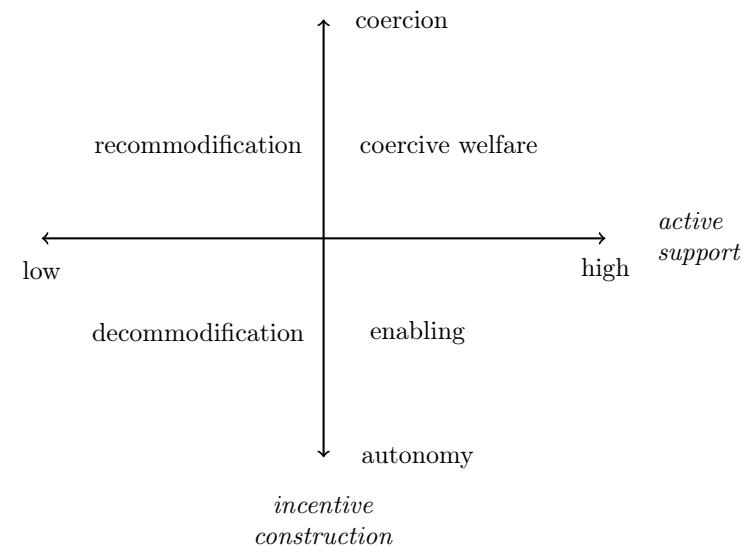
- Two stylised facts on activation (policies to bring jobless people into work)
  - One dominant view on active welfare subject (cf. Wright 2012; 2016)
  - Many country-specific activation policy mixes (Aurich, 2011; Marchal & Mechelen, 2017)
- Resulting questions against this backdrop
  - What are the links between different instruments of activation and citizens' agency?
  - Under what conditions do activation instruments and stakeholders promote or limit agency?

## Study Contributions

- Contextualised analysis of agency and investigation of links between variations in agency and different policy instruments
  - Based on literature on activation typologies, models of agency, choice and autonomy, psychosocial effects of living in poverty/on welfare
- New empirical evidence in a conservative-corporatist welfare state complementing research on lived experiences in liberal and social-democratic welfare states
  - 45 semi-structured interviews with Dutch social assistance recipients

## Activation Typologies

- Activation: “Policy of designing benefit rules and employment/training services with a view at moving unemployed income benefit recipients into work” (Lødemel & Moreira, 2014, p. 8)
- Not a dichotomy between demanding or enabling instruments, but country-specific mixes (Aurich, 2011)



Source: Aurich (2011, p. 301).

## Models of Agency

- Agency: “Purposive human action or behaviour” (Deacon, 2004, p. 447), including aspects of decision-making, choice, motivation, and capacity
- Two stylised models of the active welfare subject (Wright 2012; 2016)
  - Dominant model: Inherent inactivity/passivity that needs to be transformed
  - Counter model: Already active, creative and reflexive
- Lister’s (2004, 2015) four forms of agency of people living in poverty
  - Acknowledges and organises different forms of capacity to act
- Hoggett’s (2001) model of agency
  - Acknowledges self-as-agent and self-as-object

## Links Between Activation and Agency

- Two dimensions (Aurich, 2011)
  - Incentive construction: Agency is limited by coercive elements that limit choice and overrule preferences and values (cf. Burchardt et al., 2015; Burchardt & Holder, 2012), that jeopardise sense-making and desire for self-directedness (Fryer, 1986), that induce shame (Pellissery, Lødemel, & Gubrium, 2014; Walker et al., 2013)
  - Degree of active support: Agency is determined by opportunity structure, perceived and actual range of available options (Burchardt & Holder, 2012)
- Qualifiers/conditions: Structural constraints and power relations

## The Dutch Case: Responsibility Talk

“New model of responsibility” (Vrooman, Van Noije, & Veldheer, 2012, p. 19) in the Netherlands:  
Increased responsibility on terms prescribed by the state (Peeters & Drosterij, 2011; van Echelt & Josten, 2012)

- From caring to disciplining, stricter conditions on social assistance recipients (but to a lesser extent on working population)
- Yet, counter movements at municipal level (Kremer, van de Meer, & Ham, 2017)

## The Dutch Case: Policy Instruments

Dimension	Policy instruments	Link to agency
Incentive construction (defined at national level)	Income replacement (social assistance benefits): 70 percent of minimum wage	Enhance/not limit agency
	Coercive elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Definition of reasonable job: Acceptable job</li> <li>▪ Code of conduct: Acceptance of offered work, appropriate behaviour to find work, participation in reintegration activities/ activities in return for benefits</li> <li>▪ Sanctions: E.g. withdrawal of benefits for 1-3 months</li> </ul>	Limit agency
Active support (defined at municipal level)	Instruments/activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Instruments for diagnosis</li> <li>▪ Job mediation (e.g. application training)</li> <li>▪ Personal development (e.g. further education/training, internships)</li> <li>▪ Other forms of work (e.g. sheltered employment)</li> </ul>	Enhance/limit agency depending on degree to which they are offered





## Research Method

- 45 semi-structured interviews with social assistance recipients
  - Female: 26, male: 19
  - 18-27 years: 1, 28-44 years: 12, 45 and older: 32
  - Dutch background: 39, foreign background: 6
- Key topics
  - Experiences with living on social assistance ('getting by')
  - Meaning of work, current job search process and experiences with reintegration activities, dreams and expectations for the future ('getting out')
- Thematic analysis

## Results

- *“I simply had no choice”*
- Imposed inactivity
- Income replacement as a right?
- ‘Responsible behaviour’ within structural constraints
- Participation placements and volunteering
- Mediating agency at the Social Services office

## Discussion (I)

Dimension	Instrument	Link to agency	Qualifier	Mediator
Incentive construction	Income replacement	Enhances/ does not limit agency...	... if income replacement is perceived as right/ entitlement.	Views of society at large/significant others/caseworker.
	Coercive elements	Limit agency...	... if prescribed behaviour is not in line with own efforts to find a fitting (rather than acceptable) job, personal circumstances and/or perceived labour market situation.	Communication and/or discretion of caseworker.
Active support	High	Enhances agency...	... if active support and case management is in line with own preferences and/or labour market situation.	Communication and/or discretion of caseworker.
	Low	Limits agency...	... if active support is perceived to be needed with regard to efforts to find fitting work, personal circumstances and/or perceived labour market situation.	Communication and/or discretion of caseworker.

## Discussion (II)

- Discordance between top-down conception of the welfare recipient by policy makers/implementers and a bottom-up view based on the lived experiences of social assistance recipients
- Two major sources
  - 1) Degree to which citizens' relative position in society is taken into account
  - 2) Space (and sometimes time) in which citizens' agency is evaluated
- Virtuous cycles: Recognition of motivation, desire to develop and to make active choices

## Conclusion

- Empirical analysis supported conceptual links and substantiated qualifying role of perceptions of own situation in relation to labour market, as well as role of caseworkers and society at large
- Illustration of critical need to scrutinise underlying assumptions, particularly when they address individuals in socio-economically vulnerable situations

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