



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY

UNU-MERIT



Maastricht University

Maastricht Graduate School of Governance

Professional Judgements at Work?

A Factorial Survey Experiment on Activation Workers' Decision-making

Mira Bierbaum (UNU-MERIT/MGSoG)

Paper presented at International Conference on Welfare Conditionality,
University of York, June 26-29, 2018

Motivation and Research Questions

- Street-level bureaucrats as mediators of policy (Lipsky, 1980) and politics (Brodkin, 2013)
- Diversity of activation frontline practices (De Wilde & Marchal, 2018; Eikenaar, de Rijk, & Meershoek, 2016; Nothdurfter, 2016; van Berkel & Knies, 2017)
- Limitation: Exploration of causal links between context and decision-making (notable exception: De Wilde & Marchal, 2018)
- Resulting questions
 - To what extent do activation workers agree in their decision-making and share norms of action?
 - To what extent do disagreements in decision-making reflect different role interpretations of groups of activation workers?

Study Contributions

- Systematic exploration of agreements and disagreements in judgements of activation workers, and sources thereof, using an experimental approach
- Reflection on current practices and more transparency with regard to decision-making that creates opportunities and constraints for citizens

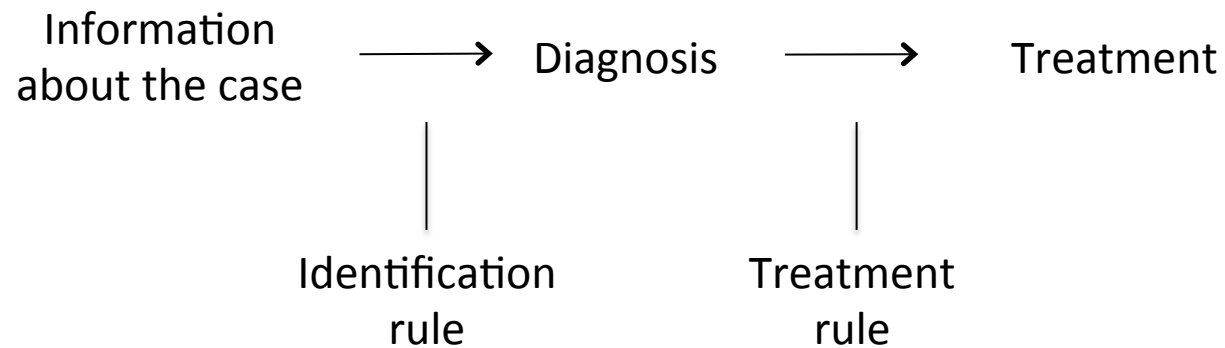
Frontline Work in an Activating Welfare State

- Context of activation work varies largely (Caswell, Kupka, et al., 2017)
 - Diversity of policy instruments and target groups
 - Contested role of activation work (professional vs. administrative activity)
 - Diversity of job design and education
 - Tensions between standardisation and individualisation
 - Varying citizen conceptions and “frames of reference” (Eikenaar et al., 2016, p. 770; Nothdurfter, 2016): Rule-focused, work-focused, caring, teaching, facilitating
- Limitations
 - Interviews/surveys: No causal links, social desirability, cognitive bias, no tacit knowledge
 - Administrative data: Difficult to disentangle often correlated factors

The Dutch Case

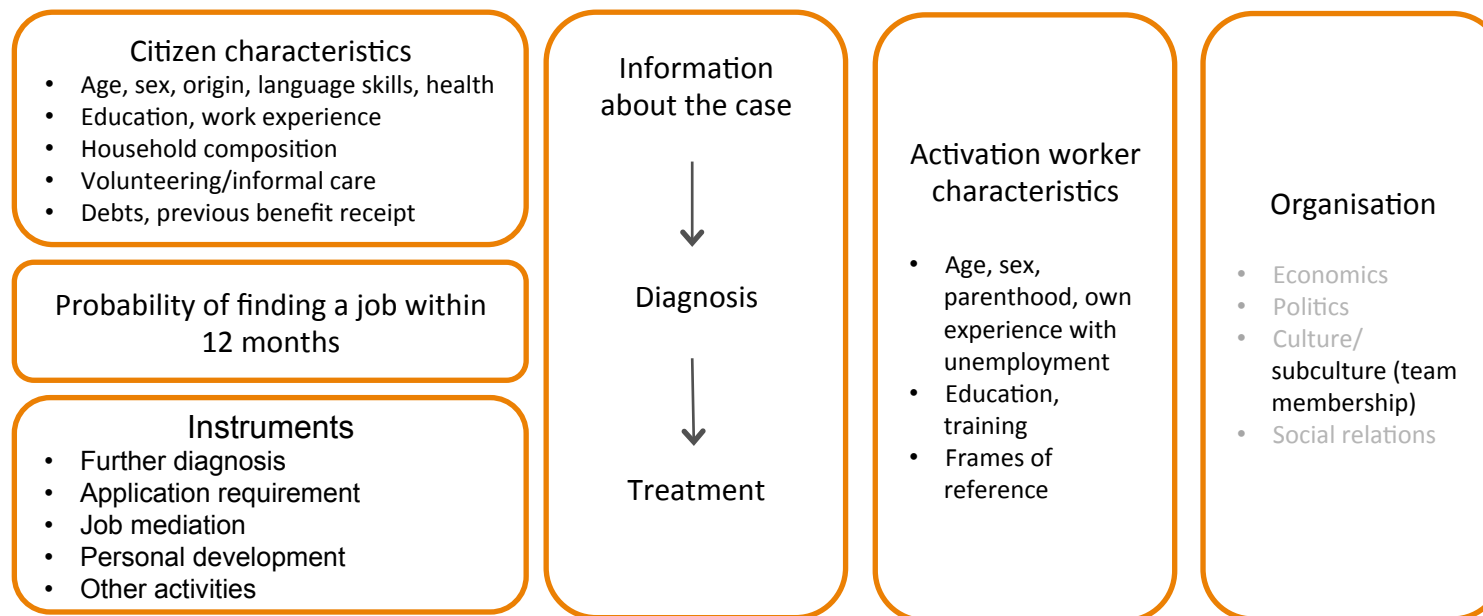
- Increasingly heterogeneous target group
- Activation instruments
 - Income replacement/code of conduct defined at national level
 - Active support defined at municipal level
- Integrated job design and various educational backgrounds of activation workers
- Differences in practices between and even within municipalities
- Professional associations only beginning to build up

Conceptual Framework (I)



Source: Own illustration based on Wallander and Molander (2014, p. 5).

Conceptual Framework (II)



Source: Own illustration based on Wallander and Molander (2014, p. 5) and Rice (2013).

Agreement and Common Warrants

- a) The diagnosed distance to the labour market increases with citizens' age (with the exception of very young applicants), limited language skills, low levels of education, little work experience, bad health, low motivation, having a child below the age of 5, providing informal care or volunteering, recent previous benefit receipt, and the occurrence of debts.
- b) The probability of a job search requirement increases as the diagnosed distance to the labour market decreases.
- c) More additional support (for instance, job mediation or personal development) is offered as the diagnosed distance to the labour market increases.
- d) A considerable share of caseworkers' variations in their decision-making cannot be explained by citizens' characteristics.

Disagreements and Frames of Reference

- a) Activation workers in the work- or rule-focused frame are more likely to impose a job search requirement than activation workers in the learning, facilitating, or caring frame.
- b) Activation workers in the learning, facilitating, or caring frame are more likely to offer additional support than caseworkers in the work- or rule-focused frame.

Factorial Survey Experiment (I): Basic Set-up

- Experiment: Level of citizen
 - Activation workers read several hypothetical case description (vignettes) in which citizen characteristics (11 dimensions with different levels) vary randomly
 - Activation workers indicate what they would do in this case (diagnosis and treatment)
- Survey: Level of activation worker
 - Socio-economic characteristics and job design
 - Frames of reference
- D-efficient sampling from vignette universe
- Multilevel analysis of data

Factorial Survey Experiment (II): Vignettes

Example 1: A 50-year-old woman has never had social assistance. Currently, she has debts. The woman is a native citizen. She lives alone with a child that is older than five years. She does currently not volunteer or provide informal care. She has physical health problems. The woman has completed primary education, but she has only very limited work experience. She shows little motivation to find work.

Example 2: A 35-year-old man recently received social assistance benefits. He has no debts. The man is an immigrant and speaks Dutch fluently. He lives with a partner and a child that is younger than five years. He currently provides informal care. He has no health problems. The man completed secondary education and has extensive work experience. He shows great motivation to find work.

Factorial Survey Experiment (III): Dependent Variables

Description	Measurement
Diagnosis	
Probability of finding a job within 12 months	Interval (0-100)
Treatment	
Further diagnosis	Binary
Application requirement	Binary
Job mediation	Categorical (application training, project 45+)
Personal development	Categorical (internships, education/training, training on the job)
Activities	Categorical (social activation, sheltered employment, activities to spend day meaningfully)

Factorial Survey Experiment (VI): Frames of Reference

Frame of reference	How important are the following objectives for your work?	What is your image of the citizen you work with?
Rule-focused	Implementing rules and regulations meticulously	Citizen as willing to cooperate (or not)
Work-focused	Promoting citizens' benefit independence/getting citizens (back) to work	Citizen as unemployed
Care	Providing citizens with the services they need	Citizen as needy
Teach	Promoting citizens' autonomous action	Citizen as pupil
Facilitate	Providing citizens with the services they want	Citizen as customer

Source: Own elaboration based on frames of reference described by Eikenaar et al. (2016).

Factorial Survey Experiment (IV): Validity

- Internal validity
 - Random variation of citizen characteristics
 - Random allocation of vignettes to respondents
- External validity
 - Lack of realism of vignette and/or response
 - Complexity of vignettes
 - Selection of respondent population

Conclusion

- Promising novel approach that can shed further light on variations in activation workers' decision-making and cause-effect relationships
- Interesting both from an academic and practical point of view
 - Strategy to establish causal links
 - Contribution to discussions on professionalism in the reintegration domain
- Possible extension: Add municipal level

References (I)

- Brodkin, E. Z. (2013a). Street-level organizations and the welfare state. In E. Z. Brodkin & G. Marston (Eds.), *Work and the welfare state. Street-level organisations and welfare policies* (pp. 17–34). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Caswell, D., Kupka, P., Larsen, F., & van Berkel, R. (2017). The frontline delivery of welfare-to-work in context. In R. van Berkel, D. Caswell, P. Kupka, & F. Larsen (Eds.), *Frontline delivery of welfare-to-work policies in Europe: Activating the unemployed* (pp. 1–11). New York, NY: Routledge.
- De Wilde, M., & Marchal, S. (2018). Weighing up work willingness in social assistance: A balancing act on multiple levels. *University of Antwerp, Herman Deleeck Centre for Social Policy, Working Paper, No. 18.08.*
- Eikenaar, T., de Rijk, A. E., & Meershoek, A. (2016). What's in a frame? How professionals assess clients in Dutch work reintegration practice. *Social Policy & Administration, 50(7), 767-786.*
- 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.*
- Rice, D. (2013). Street-level bureaucrats and the welfare state: Toward a micro-institutionalist theory of policy implementation. *Administration & Society, 45(9), 1038–1062.*

References (II)

- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: The dilemmas of the individual in public service*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- van Berkel, R., & Knies, E. (2018). The frontline delivery of activation: Workers' preferences and their antecedents. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(4), 602–615.
- Wallander, L., & Molander, A. (2014). Disentangling professional discretion: A conceptual and methodological approach. *Professions and Professionalism*, 4(3), 1-19.