

# Frontline workers' experiences with mandatory activation in Norway: Maternalistic concerns as a street- level strategy

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# Activating NEETs

- High share of NEETs are 'inactive' (OECD, 2018)
- Mandatory activation to 'combat' inactivity among youth
- The 2017 law states: "It shall be placed conditions for activity for granting benefit to people under the age of 30, unless weighty reasons speak against it".
- Room for discretion

# Research question:

How do caseworkers implement mandatory activation for young benefit recipients?

# Social assistance benefit service in Norway

- Frontline workers: social work educated
- The welfare state is conceived in positive terms in political and public discourse
- State rhetoric: 'Get up of the sofa'
- How do street-level workers with a professional background combine or integrate enabling and disciplining elements in their work?

# Theoretical perspective

Bernando Zacka. (2017). *When the State meets the street- Public Service and Moral Agency*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- Moral dispositions

- 1) Indifference, 2) caregiving and 3) enforcement

# Methods

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 25 caseworkers in six different *NAV* offices in Norway
  - 1) Background information, 2) work, 3) mandatory activation, 4) non-compliance/sanctions, possibilities, challenges and dilemmas
- Strategically selected agencies
- 21 women, four men
- All with a higher educational level
  - 16 educated social workers

# Findings

- Mandatory activation as a reason to closer follow-up
- Rarely use the word 'sanction'

*It is like a usual workplace. You can't call at noon and say 'I was ill today'. You have to call half past eight and tell you are ill.*

# Findings

*What characterize young people receiving social assistance allowances is an absence of fathers and male role models.*



# Findings

*For some youth, I have a 'mother's heart'. I praise them a lot. They appear a bit depressed walking into my office, and when they walk out they seem to feel a lot better. They get a good hug and I get a good hug in return. Then they say thank you and leave. This is what's so good about my work. However, I also tell them that «I work hard in order for you to get what you need», and therefore I expect that you do what we have agreed upon. If not, we're just standing still, stagnating and stagnating.*

# Discussion

- Slow activation
- Combination between a 'caregiver' and an 'enforcer': → Maternalism
- Justifying approach for professionals?
- Legitimise the politization of private concerns