



From policy to practice: a street-level perspective of welfare- to-work

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A brief intro

- Researcher/lecturer at Utrecht University School of Governance, NL
- Started working on W2W policies in 1990s
- Currently, member of an HRM research group at USG
- Current research themes include links between social policy and HRM studies



Research themes: Employer engagement

- Traditionally, employers/organisations largely absent as 'core stakeholders' in mainstream W2W policies; dominant philosophy: making jobseekers job-ready
- Insufficient to promote LM-participation vulnerable groups: making jobseekers job ready won't work without making jobs jobseeker ready
- Recently, stronger focus on involving employers/organisations in W2W
- Core challenge: addressing role of organisational HRM policies/practices in realising W2W aims



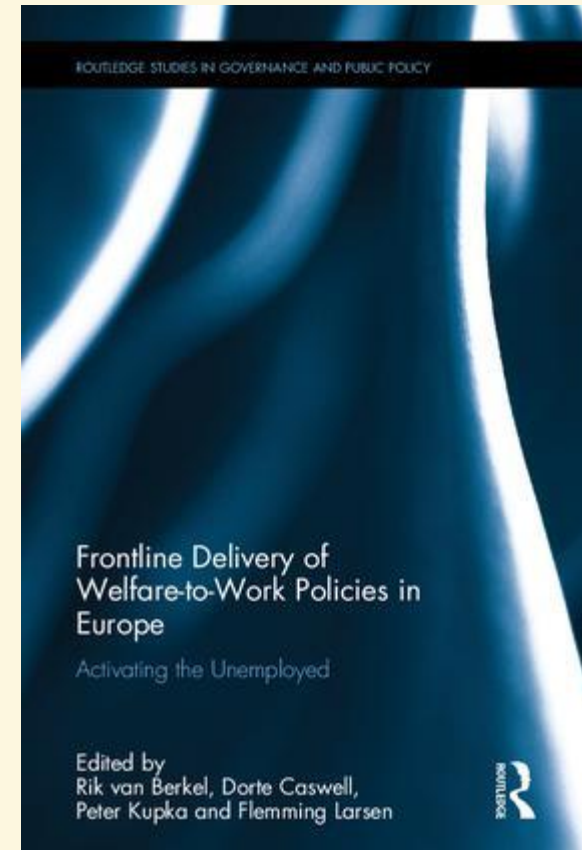
Research themes: Frontline delivery of welfare-to-work

- Most social policy/W2W scholars familiar with literature on policy implementation, street-level bureaucracies etc.
- Nevertheless: in the vast literature on W2W, frontline W2W research occupies a marginal position; national-policy-on-paper as proxy for policy-in-practice
- Problematic: 1) W2W policies are not only *national* policies; 2) W2W is not simply policy *administration* ('people changing technologies'); 3) frontline practices take place in complex contexts (and not merely a *policy context*)



Frontline delivery of welfare-to-work in Europe

- Reviewing state of the art of research of frontline delivery of W2W
- Exploring the relevance of frontline practices in shaping content and impact on clients of W2W
- Elaborating the multiple contexts of frontline work



Central argument

- If we want to understand the practical content and impact of W2W we need to focus on frontline delivery practices
- If we want to understand frontline delivery practices we need to acknowledge that frontline workers are embedded in multiple contexts: policy, governance, organisational and occupational
- If we want to make activation more effective/successful, we need to 1) address policies *and* practices; 2) focus on all contexts and the (in)consistencies between them



State of the art of frontline work research

- First studies from US; since mid 2000s increasing number of European studies
- Few studies internationally comparative
- Most studies focus on public providers
- Most studies 'single-agency' studies
- Many studies focus on delivery of more punitive aspects of W2W, relatively few focus on supportive aspects
- Few studies into FLW characteristics and their impact on W2W effectiveness



Governance context: NPM

- NPM as governance context refers to service marketisation, management of public agencies, performance management as HRM instrument.
- Findings of empirical studies into frontline impact of NPM not unequivocal
- Relevant issues: 1) varieties of (each of the aspects of); 2) explaining frontline practices in terms of NPM effects exclusively is complex



Governance context: decentralisation

- *Substantial* aspects of W2W policies (de)centralised in different degrees across place and time -> from FLW perspective, this matters in terms of *whose and what* policies workers are expected to implement
- In addition: (de)centralisation also affects characteristics of the other contexts



Organisational context: task specialisation

- Task profiles of W2W workers very diverse (internationally *and* nationally), reflecting various types of task specialisation
- Need for 'networked service provision' already starts *in* the organisation; intraorganisational boundary spanning/service coordination activities are not self-evident



Organisational context: resources

- Caseloads: little attention in FLW research but significant impact on W2W service quality and process.
- Allocation of caseloads: needs or target oriented?
- Availability of W2W services: W2W increasingly dependent on worker-client meetings



Occupational context

- Systematic knowledge lacking, but educational background of W2W workers very diverse; Sometimes seen as 'social workers' but in many countries the majority of FLW have no background in social work
- Indications that educational background matters for service delivery (e.g. through skills & expertise; attitudes)
- Policy makers/managers often *believe* that it matters
->recruitment policies part of political arena re nature of W2W
- Often workers not organised as occupational/professional group and no voice in policy debates



Context (in)consistency

- Contexts relevant for FLW do not necessarily send consistent 'performance signals' to FLW
- Inconsistencies in itself source of discretion, of options to legitimise their use of discretion, and of FLW diversity
- FLW diversity is not simply the product of 'individual preferences': it is also result of *having to* respond to conflicting signals/expectations



Relevance for welfare conditionality

- “Welfare conditionality is about linking welfare rights to ‘responsible’ behaviour”
- Frontline work shapes 1) standards for ‘responsible behaviour’; 2) attributions of responsibility (can clients be held responsible for ‘non-responsible’ behaviour?); 3) consequences of ‘non-responsible’ behaviour
- Examples of frontline W2W themes where welfare conditionality is ‘made’: Individual Action Plans and service personalisation; sanctioning; ‘acceptability’ of job offers; evaluation of clients’ willingness and job-search behaviour; etc.



Thank you for your attention!

