

## **Editorial: Labour Market Policy at Street Level**

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Since the 1990s the social and labour market policies of many European and non-European countries have seen discussions about a reorientation towards an “activating state” (Dingeldey & Rothgang 2009) and the implementation of corresponding legislation. Although the welfare states have taken different paths in implementing the transformation into an ‘enabling’, ‘activating’, or ‘workfare’ state, an activating labour market policy plays a decisive role in all of these. This means greater individual obligations for claimants. They have to show that they are searching for the agreed job or performing other steps to get back into the labour market, otherwise unemployment benefits will be cut. Both governmental social services and major welfare associations have been established to help increase employability by implementing, for example, counselling technics, or by “adapting” methods of social work (Dingeldey, 2007). The aim is to build a more personalized service for claimants (Toerien et al. 2013). One demand which is repeatedly made is that employment agencies should offer tailored, individualized services (cf. Toerien et al. 2013, 2011; Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2012; Els & Westerfield 2005). On the other hand an increasing standardization of the placement process can be observed (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2012). On the level of personal contact between the claimant and his or her personal adviser in the agency, the demand that the service offered should be tailored must be balanced with a standardization of the placement process itself.

The interaction between claimant and official (e. g. personal adviser) when a service is provided is considered central to reintegrating claimants into the labour market. At its best, this interaction is the “front line” where claimants' personal needs and resources can be identified (or not) and where potential services can be offered by the personal contact person. Personal advisers within the social services are “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980); they bring policy to people (Brodkin 2013). Therefore, it is not only the employment services as organizations which are at the heart of reforms, but also the personal advisers and their everyday practices (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2012; Toerien et al. 2013; Böhringer et al. 2012). But little is known about this everyday practice. Output-based research is still dominant. This issue therefore addresses the real-time work which is done in face-to-face interaction in employment agencies, the “opaque spaces between formal policies and outcomes” (Brodkin 2013, p 199), which have to be filled up in daily practice.

Given this background, the paper by Evelyn Brodtkin (US) reflects, on the basis of organisational case studies, how street-level bureaucrats manage the intersection of formal policies, organisational arrangements, managerial instruments and personal beliefs.

Karen Jaehrling (Germany) investigates the implications for gender equality when gender differences in treatment are no longer closely prescribed by policy directives but are left to caseworkers' doing gender practices. This is the case in Germany where the new basic allowance for jobseekers (known as Hartz IV), introduced in Germany from 2005 onwards, changed the status of many non-working women with children, who had previously not been

registered as ‘unemployed’. After the reform, they too were regarded as unemployed and were now explicitly included in the target group for the labour market authorities’ activating measures.

Navina Roman (Germany) uses a mixed-method design to examine the emergence of new local organisational structures in German job centres. Given the lack of specific detail on organisation and processes included in the legislation, she asks if different models or even “internal sub-cultures” (Schottmayer 2003, 183) may develop or continue to exist under one roof.

Merran Toerien, Roy Sainsbury, Paul Drew and Annie Irvine (UK) take an even closer look at real-time interaction in employment services. With a conversation analytical research design they focus on interactional styles in conversations between advisers and claimants. They address the question of whether there are differences between private and public service delivery for unemployed people in the UK. They argue that there is no reason, in principle, for the practices identified in the EZ to be considered to ‘belong’ in the private, but not the public, sector.

Daniela Boehringer and Ute Karl (Germany/Luxembourg) also follow a conversation-analytical approach. They address the question of how claimants and professionals display disagreement/agreement in conversations and how they escalate or terminate conflict episodes arising during interaction. The relevance of the findings is discussed for employment agencies and for social work.

Stephan Wolff and Hermann Mueller (Germany) consider the career counselling in the employment agencies of the German Federal Employment Agency. From an ethnomethodological perspective, they analyse how, in career counselling conversations, agreement is constructed on the counselling problem at issue. A “moderate openness” on the part of the client, which expresses a desire for a career, but not yet for a particular career, is a structural condition of the success of this form of counselling.

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