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Activation in Practice

Constraints and Possibilities for (Professional) Action on the Frontline of Public Employment Services

Urban Nothdurfter

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Preface

Social solidarity arrangements in industrial and post-industrial societies are changing dramatically. Whereas the post-WWII consensus in Europe pointed towards welfare playing largely a corrective or at least compensatory role in relation to the negative impact an unbridled form of capitalism would have on the cohesion of society, we are now witnessing the incorporation of large sections of welfare and social services into the logic of a free market economy.

These political and economic transformation processes have been amply documented and studied at the level of social policy analyses which give us a comprehensive, and sobering, picture of the fundamental re-structuring of social benefit arrangements in practically all European countries, particularly after 1989, when the Cold War competition ended not only in the political arena but also in terms of the latent competition of Western social market models with Eastern state socialism for the most appropriate way of protecting citizens from social suffering. These analyses show that the "three worlds of welfare" which Esping-Andersen, among others, categorised in the 1980s according to the degree to which commercial factors had been eliminated from welfare transactions have since begun to converge towards the ideological axioms of neo-liberalism which amounted to an overall "re-commodification" of social relations. This meant that not only were existing public services generally and, eventually, also those in the social domain, subjected to market principles and hence successively privatised, but welfare services were being gradually brought in line with the demands of free market ideologies and made to support rather than correct the shift in social responsibilities away from public collective institutions towards private risk reduction strategies of either a commercial or a totally individual kind. We know that not only did Tory Prime Minister Thatcher drastically curtail public welfare in the UK, but her New Labour successor, Tony Blair, too, continued the line of dismantling the welfare state, replacing it with exhortations that welfare

recipients should be activated to provide for themselves and show themselves willing to make personal efforts instead of relying on state assistance. We know that his German equivalent, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of the Social Democratic Party, was responsible for introducing similar measures of limiting access to social benefits with the infamous Hartz reforms in his country. Most other European countries followed suit, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe which had experienced drastic changes after the fall of Communism and were now imbued with enthusiasm for free market ideologies that swept away most of the social securities citizens had enjoyed under the previous regime, with all the limitations that had entailed. We learn that even Nordic countries have begun to experiment with privatisation and a shift from welfare rights to welfare obligations, which manifests itself in the stricter conditions concerning qualifying criteria for the receipt of welfare benefits and in the introduction of a variety of non-public service providers.

All this has been amply documented—what we do not know in detail, however, is the way these changes are made operational at the micro-level of service delivery and, more specifically, what effect the key reference point in this changed context, the emphasis on "activation", has on users and providers and what kind of working relations are being constructed around this highly ambiguous concept. It is the outstanding achievement of Urban Nothdurfter's study to give us insight not only into the way operators in crucial social service sectors are affected by those political changes but particularly how they are being drawn into making them somehow operational under the heading of activation. The emphasis in his findings lies on the "somehow", because he discovers in the micro-processes he analysed in minute detail a further evolution of the pattern identified now almost some forty years ago by Lipsky in the form of the discretionary margins of "street-level bureaucrats". Lipsky had found that these professional operators had to cope with the inherent contradictions of welfare in their daily transactions with clients by means of applying discretion in order to make the system of benefits "somehow" take account of individual situations. Urban Nothdurfter's findings evidence the impact of current policy frameworks that now demand the activation of clients on the function and meaning of discretion. They constrain operators to further promote the spirit, if not necessarily the letter, of a key policy princi-

ple, which is "to turn public issues back into private troubles", to use the terminology of C. Wright Mills' criticism of personal social services of the 1940s.

It is of great relevance that this study was conducted in a field of welfare which assumed paradigmatic significance ever since Reaganomics re-defined welfare as workfare: finding employment, even in the face of adverse structural labour market conditions, becomes the responsibility of the individual, whose entitlement to unemployment benefits has to be "earned" and "deserved" by conformity with disciplinary conditions imposed by the "system". And "work", or rather the willingness to work, to accept any type of work, has become a symbol for the norm of having to become active and "enterprising" in all situations of social adversity. Studying the work of professionals in services charged with facilitating, encouraging or enforcing unemployed people's (re-)entry into the labour market as the research underlying this volume does, gives a unique insight into how bureaucratic regulations, professional knowledge and personal attitudes combine to not only help people in this instrumental sense of finding a job but of defining both the identity of job-seekers as members of a distinct category and, at the same time, interpreting and "making" social policies at the coalface precisely through the margin of discretion.

Designed as a comparative study which delves deeply into the differences of political as well as professional cultures of operators in the respective service agencies in Austria and Italy, this research gives additional valuable insight into how those differences manifest themselves in their transactions with the public. While the—still very considerable—contrasts in social policy between the two European countries, as well as the differing professional training backgrounds matter indeed in this respect, it is remarkable that both sets of operators have to cope with identical contradictions and, in the end, represent at least implicitly the prevailing welfare ideology in both countries. This amounts to a fundamental splitting between duties and functions of care and of control, either in the form of "internalising" the split as a personal and lastly moral dilemma, as in the case of the Austrian professionals, or in that

of delegating control to another agent in order to be able to cherry-pick the caring relationship-fostering part of the task.

With these findings, the study reaches to the heart of social work in its final conclusion, thereby daring to open up issues which, in the clamour for efficiency in service delivery, for professionalism evidenced by scientific research or for taking shelter in areas of social services more akin to therapy and counselling, have almost disappeared from academic discourses on social work. Social work's mandate is not to make welfare bureaucracy more efficient, it is not about counselling and coaching people into well-adjusted social behaviour, nor is it about following political campaign trails for justice and equality. Social work is about transforming the contradictions which arise from modernity's dual claim for personal freedom and social justice under conditions of equality into a liveable arrangement. Social workers' professionalism proves itself in the way dimensions of care and of control can be integrated into a negotiated approach that enlists the not-enforced participation of clients into a project which addresses their individual needs at the same time as building the grass-roots conditions for justice and equality.

At no other time in recent decades does the motto first promoted by the feminist movement, "the personal is political", have more relevance than in the current state of social policy restructuring, and at no time has this relevance been more strongly denied and obscured by policies at all levels. The prevailing cultural and political emphasis on individualism is not only becoming a direct threat to constructing or even conceiving of any form of social solidarity, it also makes the job of all social service personnel almost unbearable once they become sucked into this mode of thinking and feel left alone and personally responsible in finding personal, individual solutions to issues that have their clear origins in the social and political domain. Urban Nothdurfter rightly suggests that only a collective professional response can overcome this dilemma, a revision of social work's professional mandate and identity that acknowledges the fact that caring for positive personal relationships in a professional context has an undeniable political dimension.

These findings have significance well beyond the sphere of social work because they illustrate how far the power transfer from government to governance, described by Foucault as the most characteristic effect of modernity, has reached into the inner spheres of private lives. As official governments successively relinquish their governing responsibilities through marketization and privatisation, individuals are progressively forced to develop strategies of self-governance with resulting power coalitions that deepen existing divides in society and open up completely new interest coalitions into which professionals, and particularly social professionals, become intricately embroiled. Highlighting these developments and their dangerous effects on both the users of social services and on the service operators is the central merit of this volume. In analysing current developments in precise detail in specific situations, it provides reference points for academics as well as professionals as to how to face these challenges constructively. The promise lies chiefly in the proposed potential contained in collaboration between different sectors of the welfare system and particularly between professionals and users of services. Such sharing of experiences and resources, in the context of a systematic and critical reflection on the wider context of everyday dilemmas and challenges, can, so the author implies, release the energy necessary to launch transformative processes which have at the same time a personal and a political dimension. Urban Nothdurfter points the way forward to an actualised version of professional social work and to the affirmation of social work as an academic discipline that provides a solid basis in research for this professionalism.

Walter Lorenz

Overview and Acknowledgements

Individualised activation services have gained in importance in all European welfare states making lower-level discretion an intrinsic feature of activation policies. The debate on activation policies and challenges to social citizenship must therefore go beyond formal policy and take into account its operational and street-level dimension, which shapes what is eventually produced as policy on the ground.

This book focuses on frontline activation work as the very moment where activation policies encounter their target groups and real-world solutions have to be found. It contributes to the debate on constraints and possibilities of activation work in a field where challenges are often neglected both by social policy and social work research, although it has become a central arena for welfare state intervention and, eventually, for the realisation of social citizenship. Particular attention is paid to the questions as to whether and to what extent professionalising activation work could counteract the precarious and highly individualised role of frontline workers in this rather ambiguous public domain.

In the first part, the book initially addresses the broad shift towards activation as an ideational project, its expression in welfare state development and its implications in terms of social citizenship. Against this background, the particular importance of frontline work in activation services is pointed out. Addressing the main features of its governance and organizational contexts first, the book then presents different theoretical approaches to frontline work as street-level bureaucracy, as part of a governmental project and as situated agency and meaning in action. Concluding the first part, the book outlines current research perspectives and the debate on the professionalisation of "activation work".

The second part of the book draws on a comparative study undertaken on the frontline of public employment services in the cities of Vienna and Milan. The findings presented provide insights into how policy and contextual

factors shape practitioners' perceptions of their role, their use of discretion and their strategies in dealing with the challenges of "activation work" in everyday practice and in interaction with their clients.

This book stems from a long period of research and reflection on what activation eventually means at the street level and in the interaction with clients on the frontline of public employment and social services.
I would like to express my very great appreciation to those who helped me during this process with their advice, encouragement, useful critiques and support.
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Without their frontline stories, I could not have written this book.

Part One

1. The Activation Turn — The Broad Shift Towards Activation in European Welfare States

The first chapter of this book analyses the broad shift towards activation as central policy paradigm in the development of European welfare states. Welfare state development goes beyond a mere functional adjustment of existing programmes and institutions and has to be understood always also as an ideational project representing changing ideas about the welfare state itself, the general goals of its interventions and the notion of social citizenship.

Against this background, the chapter critically challenges the apparently compelling and straightforward idea of activation, pointing out its inherent ambivalence and the tensions between the demanding and enabling dimension in its politics and policies. Subsequently, the chapter briefly analyses the transformation of European welfare states taking into account both international and supranational influences as well as reform trajectories and typologies provided by comparative welfare state research and highlighting both a broad convergence on the ideational dimension as well as the increasing importance of the local dimension and lower level discretion. Finally, the chapter discusses the challenges and impacts of the activation turn on social citizenship introducing the conceptual framework for analysing frontline activation work as a practice of citizenship.

1.1 Welfare State Change as an Ideational Project

Since the early 1990s, European welfare systems have been subject to substantial change and important reform processes and questions about the relationship between social policy and economic productivity, particularly in regard to a stronger nexus between welfare and work, have been high on the agenda (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Castles et al., 2010; Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Morel et al., 2012; Evers & Guillemard, 2013; Hemerijck, 2013; Palier & Hay, 2017). While the early "retrenchment literature" (Pierson, 1994, 2001) focused on incremental adjustments while arguing that the welfare state as such had proved to be quite resilient, processes of welfare state change have increased over the years and reforms considered unthinkable and unfeasible in the 1990s are now being adopted and substantial retrenchment has oc-

curred even in areas of the welfare state which were supposed to be the most resilient ones (Ebbinghaus, 2012; Bonoli & Natali, 2012).

Welfare state reform is, however, not only about quantitative cutbacks and cost containment measures. Welfare state development has also undergone important qualitative shifts. Alongside instances of retrenchment, welfare state reforms have seen changing orientations in social and employment policy with the rise of new policies and even expanding provisions in different fields (Andersen et al., 2005; Lessenich, 2009; Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Evers & Guillemard, 2013; Hemerijck, 2013; Kvist, 2017). These policies have been labelled and interpreted differently in the literature, but there is wide consensus on their substantial significance for the welfare settlement in early 21st century Europe (Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Hemerijck, 2013). As Bonoli and Natali (2012) point out, "one of the most salient developments in social policy over the last two decades is the assignment of a new set of functions to the welfare state and the development of tools that go with them" (p. 5). Behind these developments stand new ideas on the welfare state itself, on which role it should assume and on how it should intervene in today's post-industrial societies. Today's welfare states are increasingly expected to bring non-working people into employment, but also to facilitate the conciliation of work and family life, to provide care services and to complement work income for the working poor. At the same time, the field of social policy is considered a part of the broader economic and political settlement of a country and the new welfare state is supposed to integrate fiscal, employment, social and education policies more firmly. Most of these new functions of the welfare state go hand in hand with a stronger nexus between work and welfare and "can be seen as part of a broader reorientation of social policy from income protection to the promotion of labour market participation" (Bonoli & Natali, 2012, p. 5). In this sense, policies aiming at moving non-working people into employment constitute the core element of welfare state reforms all over Europe and concern increasingly large groups of state welfare beneficiaries, i.e. not only unemployment benefit recipients, but also other target groups such as social assistance recipients, lone parents and disabled people.

This reorientation of the welfare state from income protection to activation also reflects a departure from the ideas and goals of the post-war welfare state or, as it has been pointed out metaphorically, its transformation

from "safety net to trampoline" (Cox, 1998). In fact, there has been a growing interest in ideational aspects of social policy change and in different fields of welfare state development (Taylor-Gooby, 2005, Seeleib-Kaiser & Fleckenstein, 2007; Schmidt, 2008; 2011, 2017; Hoppe, 2011; Fleckenstein, 2011; Wincott, 2011; Béland & Petersen, 2017). These contributions point out the importance of interpretative patterns emphasising certain policy themes, preferences, values and symbols in social policy development and diffusion[1] and show that recent reforms in European welfare states have proven a remarkable shift in ideational perspectives. New ideas and paradigms "have gained momentum and shaped both the interpretation of problems and the definition of solutions" (Bonoli & Natali, 2012, p. 13).

In the context of this work, referring to an ideational perspective is useful to gain a better grasp of the broad shift towards activation and its paradigmatic character both in social policy development and also in terms of their impact on decisional parameters and as basis of judgement of the actors involved in implementation and provision processes. Rediscovering the role of ideas helps towards an understanding of how the perception and interpretation of problems as well as the political agenda for their solution are shaped by ideological repertoires. Moreover, adopting an ideational perspective means also assessing the role of different policy actors and pointing out how discourses and processes of social learning are important aspects in policymaking in different contexts and on different levels. Béland (2005) rejects a mere rationalistic vision of policy making as responding rationally to well-known problems and argues that different social and political actors, also from the parapolitical sphere[2], seek to frame alternatives in a coherent manner and to promote them as consistent policy options. It is through these processes that abstract ideas are condensed in constraining policy paradigms and brought to the political agenda, or as Béland (2005) makes the point,

> against the impression that policy ideas have little consistency, it must be stressed that most alternatives are grounded in a policy paradigm which constitutes

1 For a structured overview on policy diffusion and transfer in comparative welfare state research see Obinger et al. (2013).

2 Horne (2002) coined the concept of parapolitical sphere as located at the interstices of business, government and academia.

> the structured intellectual background of policy decisions. These paradigms serve as 'road maps' to experts and policy makers by providing them with a relatively coherent set of assumptions about the functioning of economic, political and social institutions.… Far from being purely cognitive, paradigms are inherently normative and *programmatic*: they help policy makers decide how to reform existing programmes, or to create new ones. (p. 8)

Different new ideas on the role and function of the welfare state have crystallized into a widely-accepted political discourse and into the normative paradigm of activation, which has been, indeed, a kind of road map in welfare state reform and brought about similar choices in social policy development across European welfare states. Moreover, the ideational perspective is useful for understanding the role of political and parapolitical actors on different levels. The shift towards activation has been emphasized by transnational policy advice as well as by parapolitial actors and intellectual designers and opinion makers. At the same time, this broad shift in social policy development has also induced a more prominent role for subnational levels in policy making processes and for dimensions which go beyond formal policy making. As will be discussed later on, questions of local governance and implementation have become important issues in the context of activation, and lower-level discretion has to be considered an intrinsic feature of the respective policies.

Ideas do matter. Welfare state reforms are grounded in specific normative paradigms and ideational backgrounds. However, to "become effective forces in history" (Weber, 1905/2001, p. 90) ideas must be supported, and implemented, by different actors on different levels. Or, as Geertz (1972) points out, ideas have to

> be carried out by powerful social groups to have powerful social effects; someone must revere them, celebrate them, defend them, impose them. They have to be institutionalised in order to find not just an intellectual existence in society, but, so to speak, material as well. (p. 314)

In this sense, understanding how social policy is eventually made concrete calls for taking a closer look at how different actors, eventually also on the

street level, take up prevailing interpretative patterns of the social, including corresponding solutions (Lessenich, 2009).

1.2 The Idea of Activation

But which idea(s) does the notion of activation refer to exactly and what is its paradigmatic impact? As Eichhorst et al. (2010) point out,

> at first sight, activation is a compellingly simple idea. For people of working age, doing something useful—especially working—is much better than sitting out time on public benefits, however generous or meagre they may be. This is certainly desirable for better social cohesion, solidarity and the long-term viability of welfare states and public budgets. It is probably this straightforward normative idea that is responsible for the widespread appeal and success of policy measures introduced under the label of activation. (p. 2)

However, policies subsumed under this label are far more complex than the appealing idea of bringing the jobless into work, and the term of activation itself ends up being "tremendously versatile and thus extremely imprecise" (Eichhorst et al., 2010, p. 4). In general, activation policies have as their core aim the removal of options for labour market exit and the unconditional receipt of benefits as well as the removal of individual barriers to employment. Accordingly, they combine demanding and enabling elements and policy instruments or, metaphorically speaking, both "sticks" and "carrots". The conditional demands of activation concern the duration and level of benefits, more restrictive preconditions, sanctions for non-compliance and different individual activity requirements. The enabling side of activation is given by job search assistance and counselling services, employer subsidies, in-work benefits and training schemes. Most of these schemes can be seen as classical instruments of active labour market policy. However, in many contexts the activation turn has brought about a much stronger emphasis on the individualisation of services (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; Bifulco, 2017). Individualised service provision through case management is, hence, a central feature in activating employment and social policies (McDonald & Marston, 2005). Moreover, participation in active labour market support schemes has

increasingly become mandatory and the claiming of benefits depends in a stricter way on individual activity requirements (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; Lødemel & Moreira, 2014). Anyway, there is a wide scope of possibilities for the conceptual and practical combination of enabling and demanding elements. What activation eventually means can differ considerably according to the relative importance given to these two fundamental dimensions. (Saraceno, 2002; Eichhorst et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2013).

The balance between demanding and enabling is not only a matter for the formal policy context, but it can vary in each individual case (Eichhorst et al., 2010). In fact, the emerging emphasis on the individual responsibility to seek work and, thus, to be self-sufficient[3] through employment and the need for individualised service provision make frontline practice a decisive arena of activation (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Sowa & Staples, 2017; van Berkel et al., 2017). The introduction of individualised contractual agreements is a crucial development which resulted from activation policy reforms (Gilbert & Van Voorhis, 2001; van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; Gilbert, 2013). These contractual arrangements (often referred to as activation plans)

> specify the clients' obligations and rights to participate in education, training, job search, subsidized work, and other activities to improve their chances for paid employment along with the agency's duty to provide a range of supports and opportunities aimed at facilitating the movement of clients from welfare to work.… This development has altered the way unemployment, disability and social assistance schemes operate. Administrative procedures for the allocation of benefits have moved away from the impartiality and anonymity of social rights framed by bureaucratic formulas toward the more individualized and discretionary dispensation of benefits based on case-by-case management. (Gilbert and Van Voorhis, 2001, pp. 294f)

Activation policies are, thus, grounded in a new normative background which concerns the relationship between the state and its citizens and a new recalibration of rights and responsibilities. As Eichhorst et al. (2010) point out, it is this new normative programmatic character and the relative empha-

3 For a critical examination of the notion of self-sufficiency as a central policy goal see e.g., Breitkreuz and Williamson (2012).

sis on obligations, which characterise the broad shift towards activation in general and which, more specifically, also mark the difference between traditional approaches of active labour market measures and so called "new" concepts in the form of activation schemes.

> The normative philosophy of recent labour market reforms is one of reciprocal obligations. Hence, participation in enabling schemes is mandatory. This is the most important difference between pre-activation labour market policies and current settings. (pp. 6f)

However, what the notion of activation exactly refers to depends also on the academic discipline and the analytical interests of the respective discourses. While an economic perspective usually represents the idea of activation as imperative of actively encouraging employment participation among all categories of citizens in the dynamic and volatile economies of post-industrial societies and a legal perspective has somehow difficulty in encapsulating the idea of activation as a coherent strategy within a legal framework, in a welfare state perspective the notion of activation has become a dominant concept in the analysis of welfare state change and a major topic of an overwhelming academic debate and an ever-growing body of literature. Activation with its emphasis on the role of self-sufficiency, income and social inclusion through gainful employment instead of social benefits shares in part the arguments of classic critiques of the welfare state, as it considers traditional approaches of welfare state intervention as "passive" (or passivity creating)[4] maintenance support and, thus, as part of the problem (Gilbert and Van Voorhis, 2001; Saraceno, 2002; Gilbert, 2013). At the same time, tipping the balance in favour of a more "active" approach, activation does not mean the withdrawal of the state

4 The distinction between "active" and "passive" programmes and social policies is a significant hint on discursive changes in the conception of social security (Sinfield, 1999). While the notion of "passive benefits" contributes to a negative imagery of benefits as passivising work disincentives, the notion of "active policies" contributes towards shifting the focus and transferring responsibility on individuals who have to be "activated". Interestingly, as Papadopoulos points out, "putting aside for a moment the moral undertones regarding the behaviour of the unemployed that are implicit in the use of the words 'passive' and 'active', it was never clarified adequately in the conventional literature why an adequate level of 'passive' unemployment compensation providing effective help during the period of job searching is contributing less to the activation of the unemployed than an 'active' seminar of vocational training." (Papadopoulos, 2005, p. 13).

but its even stronger intervention in terms of activation strategies. Activation can, however, have many faces and look very different in different contexts and welfare traditions and depending on the balance between its demanding and its enabling dimension as well as on its influence on different areas of welfare state intervention. Accordingly, the shift towards activation has also been discussed and interpreted very differently in the literature, e.g. as "re-commodification" (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Papadopoulos, 2005), as "new" social policies or, more generally, as recalibration of rights and duties. Additionally, the welfare state itself had been relabelled in different ways, as "new", "workfare", "enabling", "active" or, more recently, as "social investment" welfare state (Peck, 2001, Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Gilbert, 2002; Morel et al., 2012; Hemerijck, 2013). Obviously, the welfare state perspective does not offer only a variety of different labels, but there are also different approaches of analysis and strands of research which address activation policies. Activation is addressed as analysis of single programmes, in connection with rescaling processes, and thus, with issues of governance and implementation and in relation to provision of individualised activation services. All these issues have also been analysed in a comparative perspective and in relation to the question of converging tendencies between different countries and welfare regimes. Last but not least, as already pointed out, there is also growing interest in activation discourses, in ideational aspects and the normative dimension of the activation paradigm as well as in its implications for social citizenship.

However, despite different foci, approaches and interpretations, many scholars agree that the political project of activation stands for a fundamental paradigmatic shift and has opened up a new chapter in welfare state development (Andersen et al., 2005; Lessenich, 2009; Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011; Morel et al., 2012; Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Evers & Guillemard, 2013; Kvist, 2017).

1.3 Between Re-Commodification and Social Investment: The Many Worlds of Activation

The following paragraphs show, first, the importance of international and supranational influences on activation concepts and policies in national welfare contexts. Afterwards, an overview on the debate in comparative welfare state

research points out different approaches to and regimes of activation in the European context in order to discuss, finally, current convergence on the idea of social investment.

1.3.1 International and supranational influences

The broad shift towards activation has also been emphasised by transnational policy advice provided both by international organisations, such as the OECD or the ILO, and by the supranational level of the European Union (Mc Bride & Williams, 2001; Casey, 2004; Watt, 2004, 2006; Armingeon, 2007; Servais, 2009; Heidenreich & Zeitlin, 2009; Weishaupt, 2010a; Hemerijck, 2012a).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the OECD began to focus on unemployment as a structural problem and to outline a new political agenda aspiring towards an "active society" (OECD, 1990; Walters, 1997). This new approach and the associated political agenda of the OECD included as its core ideas the shift from "passive" to "active" labour market policies, the improvement of the employability and the adaptability of workers through education and lifelong learning and the reorientation and reorganisation of public employment services (PES). In, 1994, the OECD published the OECD Jobs Study (OECD, 1994), which became the main reference for the subsequent OECD labour market reform proposals. During the following years, the OECD articulated ten broad policy guidelines, which were backed up by about 70 detailed policy recommendations and together constituted the so-called OECD Job Strategy (OECD, 1997), one of the first international reform catalogues emphasising the role of stronger work incentives and the negative side effects of social benefits (Eichhorst et al., 2010). Accordingly, the OECD reform proposals have often been interpreted as neoliberal prescriptions in which social policy is considered as braking economic development and in which the focus clearly lies on improving labour market flexibility as the key ingredient for job creation and economic growth (Casey, 2004; Weishaupt, 2010a). Also in the years after the launch of the Jobs Strategy the OECD continued to scrutinise and to question traditional active labour market policies (ALMPs) in regard both to their efficiency and effectiveness and to stress the need for stronger activation. In this context, the OECD began to focus increasingly on the reform of national public employment services (PES) and advocated a

new PES model in which the core functions of PESs, namely unemployment benefit administration, job brokerage and the referral of the unemployed to ALMP programmes, should be integrated by setting up so-called "one-shop offices". This closer integration was recommended in order to allow an effective application of work tests, to provide jobseekers with the skills needed by the labour market and to avoid long-term dependency on benefits (OECD, 1997). Moreover, the OECD emphasised the importance of job brokering at an early stage of unemployment and the targeted and individualised approach in supply-side oriented activation policies and, thus, recommended the use of reliable profiling techniques and the grouping of jobseekers according to their job-readiness.[5] The OECD recommendations have also highlighted the use of performance targets and "management by objective" techniques. This way, PESs are expected to become more decentralized and flexible, giving—eventually—also frontline staff more leeway to better respond to local labour markets and individual jobseeker needs. The OECD also explicitly recommended the modernization of PES governance structures through the embracement of a stronger service and market orientation. In this sense, the ideational turn (Weishaupt, 2010a) of the OECD recommendations incorporated important aspects of the philosophy of New Public Management in order to transform PES into modern management agencies and, thus,

> to "reinvent government" and to recalibrate "public governance" through (partial) privatization, deregulation, and decentralisation, while increasing competition, promoting new partnerships and introducing new incentive structures of both public employees and customers. (p. 170)

In the 2006 edition of the OECD Employment Outlook (OECD, 2006), the OECD provided an overall reassessment of its Jobs Strategy, which has been interpreted as less neoliberal and as positively acknowledging something akin to a European Social Model (Weishaupt, 2010a). This revised Jobs Strategy is less concerned with labour market rigidities and contains a noticeable shift in its prescriptions from free market forces to innovative public policy mixes endorsing the role of some state-led capacity building, the combina-

5 For a critical discussion of technologies used to classify and categorise unemployed people on benefits see, for instance, Caswell, Marston and Larsen (2010).

tion of labour market flexibility with social security measures, the expansion of labour demand and stability-oriented macro economic policies. This reorientation of the OECD prescriptions towards "more carrots and fewer sticks" (Watt, 2006, p. 11) clearly reflects a closer convergence to a more "European" approach and the acknowledgement of the good performance of the Scandinavian countries, especially Denmark (OECD, 2006; Kvist, Pedersen & Köhler, 2010; Weishaupt, 2010). During the following years of financial and economic crisis, the OECD has reaffirmed this orientation and highlighted the need to respond to the economic and social costs of the resulting job crisis with adequate and accessible income support and by scaling up effective active labour market policies (OECD, 2009a). In its latest Employment Outlook (2017) the OECD emphasises the need to address the concerns underlying the populist backlash against globalisation as they highlight areas in which employment, skills and social protection policies must be reinforced and adapted to changing economic environments. Although labour market resilience in the wake of the recent crisis differed greatly among countries, in the majority of OECD labour markets the unemployment rate has returned to close to its pre-crisis level and the inclusiveness of labour markets has increased. The OECD emphasises that spending on active labour market policies needs to respond strongly to cyclical increases of unemployment in order to promote a quick return to work in the recovery and to preserve the mutual obligations ethos in activation regimes, and that in light of the transformations of the labour market, the combination of skills policies, activation measures and up-to-date social protection systems continue to play a key role in helping workers to successfully navigate ongoing transformations and to benefit from technological progress (OECD, 2017).

The European level had, historically, limited influence on the labour and social policies of its member states, and the impact of the European integration process was mainly described as retrenchment of national regulatory capacities and as "negative" integration rather than as development of common policies (Leibfried & Pierson, 1995). However, throughout the 1990s also the European Union emerged as an important actor in the proliferation of new ideas and recommendations in the fields of labour market and social policy. The first documents and guidelines shared the vision of an active employment policy echoing the OECD recommendations (Weishaupt, 2010a).

However, while the OECD had been primarily concerned with labour market rigidities and enforcing market mechanisms, the European approach put more emphasis on capacity-building state intervention and gradually adopted different strategies for laying the groundwork for a common employment strategy in the European Union. In 1997, the Amsterdam Treaty officially introduced the European Employment Strategy (EES), opening a new phase in coping with unemployment in Europe. The contents of the EES strategy were built around the four pillars of employability, adaptability, entrepreneurship and equal opportunities. The main emphasis, however, was given to the employability pillar, which identified early and individualised intervention, skills and training as key issues. With the EES the European Union has been clearly supportive of a general activation approach as the strategy

> embodied the normative view that "good" social policy is an activating policy that prevents long-term unemployment through early, individualised interventions and investments in people, while consolidating the cognitive assumption that supply-side labour market policy interventions lead to structural improvements. (Weishaupt, 2010a, p. 164)

This ideational orientation had also been confirmed in the context of the Lisbon Strategy devised in 2000 by which the European Union committed itself to becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Council of the European Union, 2000). In 2003, five years after its launch, the EES was revised and simplified by supporting the overarching objectives of full employment, quality and quantity of work, social inclusion and an inclusive labour market by ten concrete recommendations. The revised EES of 2003 was also more specifically concerned with policy implementation and governance, stressing the need for the allocation of suitable financial resources, the involvement of the social partners and more effective public employment services (Watt, 2004). Parallel to the revision of the EES, the European Union developed a consolidated framework in order to allow constant peer-review and policy diffusion processes and to establish regular and systematic monitoring and cumulative reform activities (Zeitlin, 2009; Weishaupt, 2010a). The adoption of the "Integrated

Guidelines for Jobs and Growth" by the member states in 2005 and their integration in the revised Lisbon Strategy has been interpreted as a neoliberal turn in the European approach and as supporting a stronger workfarist orientation. However, despite this shift, the European debate continued to adhere to the idea of a European Social Model and to search for ways to promote economic and employment growth without dismissing norms and structures of social protection. In this context, and inspired mainly by the Danish variant of combining lower employment protection standards with higher unemployment benefits and extensive active labour market policies, the concept of "flexicurity" gained in importance and was encapsulated in the Common Principles of Flexicurity adopted by the European Council in 2007. During the following years of financial and economic crisis, the EU has additionally reaffirmed that the main focus of EU initiatives should be activation. With the 2008 *Recommendation on the Active Inclusion of People Excluded From the Labour Market* (Commission of the European Communities, 2008), the EU suggested common national and local strategies based on adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services and the 2009 communication *A Shared Commitment for Employment* (Commission of the European Communities, 2009) again explicitly emphasised the importance of capacity-building-oriented intervention. Although the potential of the Europe 2020 growth strategy (European Commission, 2010) of strengthening the social dimension of the EU has been critically discussed (Marlier et al., 2010), the objective of inclusive growth is, at least programmatically, also focused on measures investing in skills and in training and social protection systems. The *Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: A European Contribution Towards Full Employment* (European Commission, 2011) stressed the importance of employment services and employment assistance initiatives supporting at the same time the greater conditionality in unemployment benefit receipt. The European key objective of full employment through activation was highly challenged during the years of financial and economic crisis and many European countries had to deal with alarming unemployment rates, especially amongst young people. Accordingly, the main concern of EU employment initiatives was reducing youth unemployment and particularly supporting young people not in education, employment or training (the so called NEETs) in regions with a youth unemployment rate above 25%. The communication *Working*

Together for Europe's Young People – A Call to Action on Youth Unemployment (European Commission, 2013a) set out steps to be taken to get young people into work, education or training and called upon the European institutions, member states, the social partners and civil society to work in partnership in order to accelerate the implementation of the Youth Guarantee (Council of the European Union, 2013) and the investment in young people and to develop EU-level tools to help countries and firms in recruiting young people. With the 2013 *Social Investment Package* the Commission again emphasised a social investment approach urging the member states to "reflect social investment in the allocation of resources and the general architecture of social policy"(European Commission, 2013b, p. 9)[6]. In this context, the EU aims to guide its member states in using their social budgets more efficiently and effectively to ensure adequate and sustainable social protection, strengthening people's capacities, offering better integrated packages of benefits and services, preventing social exclusion and investing particularly in children and young people to increase their opportunities in life. In its current policy roadmap for the implementation of the Social Investment Package, the EU seeks to strengthen the social investment approach through processes of follow up and dialogue with member states in the Social Protection Committee about the trends to watch pinpointed by the Social Protection Performance Monitor (SPPM), through making the best use of EU funds to support social investment and to streamline governance and reporting activities of the member states (European Commission, 2015). As Astor et al. point out, the EU has made substantial efforts to support policy reform in its member states towards a social investment approach. Although many member states have been reorienting their social and employment policies in this direction, large differences still exist and not all countries are actually reforming their policies in an integrated fashion. Additionally, in some cases the crisis and fiscal constraints have complicated these reform efforts more than in others (Astor et al., 2017)[7]. Assessing how EU involvement in member states has altered with respect to labour market and social policy, de la Porte and Heins (2015) highlight that, despite new instruments of strengthening budgetary

6 For the discussion of the social investment perspective see Chapter 1.3.3.

7 For the Italian case see Kazepov, Y. and Ranci, C. 2017.

discipline on the one hand, and initiatives to address and improve the social dimension of the EU on the other hand, the weakness of surveillance and enforcement mechanisms slow down the move towards a new era of European integration. Focusing on the social investment strategy promoted by the EU, de Munck and Lits (2017) make a plea for its broader normative foundation in order to overcome a market-driven-only approach to social investment and to base it instead more on moral concerns of positive liberty rather than on negative freedoms and efficiency only. In any case, against the background of the current questions and political struggles over the future of the EU, the strengthening of its social dimension (as proclaimed with the European Pillar of Social Rights) as well as its involvement with respect to labour market and social policies of its member states will be crucial aspects to be addressed.

However, despite the unbroken emphasis on the programmatic level, during the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis, activation and/or social investment policies have been challenged from two sides in many European countries (Heidenreich & Aurich-Beerheide, 2014; Hastings & Heyes, 2016). On the one hand, economic possibilities for comprehensive activation policies have been seriously limited in many member states due to the economic downturn and the priority placed on austerity policies. On the other hand, activation policies have also been criticised for their negative effect on social security, as the increase of expenditure in activation policies is often associated with reduced social assistance adequacy because they legitimate the reduction of minimum income levels and impose stricter obligations on benefit recipients. In this sense, some contributions have also associated activation policies with growing poverty trends and the risk of losing in translation the positive elements of social investment and ending up with a clearer neoliberal version of workfarism (Nelson, 2011; Cantillon, 2011; Cantillon and van Lancker, 2013, Taylor-Gooby et al., 2014; van Vliet & Wang 2015; Bengtsson et al., 2017).

With regard to their role as proliferators of policy ideas and as loci for labour market and social policy agenda development, both the OECD and the EU have gained remarkably in importance since the 1990s. Initially, the OECD and the EU offered competing sets of recommendations based on different cognitive and normative underpinnings. From the second half of the

1990s, however, a phase of gradual recalibrations on both sides has subsequently led to programmatic convergence on a common paradigm and an increasingly coherent set of recommendations, which has, in the EU context, been further developed towards an agenda coined as social investment.

1.3.2 Activation: Approaches, regimes, typologies

While international and supranational factors triggered and accelerated the shift towards activation across European welfare states, the more detailed picture of respective approaches and trajectories is rather complex. There is a broad debate on the questions of convergence or divergence in domestic welfare reform processes and on the possibility of distinguishing different activation patterns or regimes among countries. The responses to these questions differ remarkably depending on whether they focus on the role of institutions, ideas or partisanship on which components of activation are taken into account, and on whether they take into account only spending profiles of active labour market policy (as a share of labour market policy spending) and formal policy schemes or if they also consider the dimension of governance and service provision.

The following paragraphs sketch a brief overview of the debate concerning different approaches to and "regimes" of activation. With the broad shift to activation, welfare state politics has abandoned the idea of a "one-fits-all" welfare state in favour of a system of more targeted and individualised forms of welfare state intervention. The idea of activation and the corresponding policies are, however, ambiguous by nature, as they combine and, indeed, have to balance new coercive features with investments in personal capabilities and social capital. This balance between the demanding and the enabling side of activation depends not only on national regimes and frameworks but is also shaped by implementation processes, governance models and local practices. However, the following overview outlines different approaches, policy logics and paths of activation in order to provide the bigger background of common directions as well as divisions in the adoption of the activation paradigm in European welfare states.

A strong emphasis on active labour market policies is not an ideational innovation of the activation paradigm per se. Historical legacies and

welfare traditions show that in the Nordic countries active labour market policies have traditionally been an important part of social policy and also in countries like Germany and Austria, with their emphasis on vocational training, tools of active policy have been pioneered long before the activation turn (Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004). However, it is commonly acknowledged that the emphasis on active labour market policies of the Nordic countries and their approach and experiences with activation have served as a role model and as a counterbalance to the narrow workfarist interpretation of activation in the neoliberal tradition, giving shape to a "more European" approach to activation (Bonoli, 2010). The political project of activation that started in the 1990s resulted "from the transfer of neoclassical economist ideas and norms into social policy" (Bothfeld & Betzelt, 2011, p. 4) based on the ideal typical model of the economic citizen who is self-responsible and self-sufficient through labour market participation. This paradigm shift has had an important impact on the reshaping (Serrano Pascual & Magnusson, 2007) of welfare states from the socialisation of risks and collective protection towards individual responsibility and protection. In fact, the main features of activation strategies, such as the priority given to paid work as primary access to social participation, the flexibilisation of employment relationships, the introduction of new labour promotion instruments, the restraint of social security provision and the reorganisation of public employment services appear in most European countries. At the same time, forms and meanings of activation vary considerably and their expression in policies differs widely depending on diverging values and path dependencies of diverse welfare traditions. Usually, comparative analyses depict a continuum of different solutions or activation regimes between the two extremes of workfare strategies in their strictest sense (see e.g. Peck, 2001) on the one hand and more "generous" approaches of capability promotion (see e.g. Bonvin & Farvaque, 2007) on the other. Along this continuum, hybrid and ambiguous solutions coexist, giving leeway for different interpretations and ample discretion, which also account for diversity in activation policy outcomes (Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004).

Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2004) point out the common feature "of enhancing the various social functions of 'paid work' and labour market participation" (p. 426). However, they challenge the idea of a substantive

convergence under the Anglo-Saxon influence (Gilbert, 2002) and refer to two distinct ideal types of activation, the liberal type and the universalistic type.[8] In the so called liberal type, the focus lies clearly on enhancing the individuals' relationships with the labour market, and active labour market and social policies take on only a limited role, being basically restricted "to inciting individuals to seek work, providing quick information and simple matching services, as well as investing in short-term vocational training" (Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004, p. 427). Thus, in the liberal type, activation manifests itself mainly as inciting people to be as active as possible and to accept any job on the market as it is, entailing in this way both the re-commodification of the system and the retrenchment of social expenditure. In the universalistic type, in contrast, social policy retains its traditional contribution to well-being much more, providing more comprehensive services and guaranteeing relatively higher standards of living for the assisted. Although a certain degree of re-commodification may take place also in the universalistic type, "activation applies to all citizens in a relatively egalitarian manner and the 'negotiating' between the individual's and the society's demands appears as much more balanced" (Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004, p. 427). Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer compare the analyses of different European countries and conclude that the behavioural demands on citizens have increased across the countries taken into account. In this sense, both the demand of active engagement in labour market-related activities and the increasing conditionality of benefits are common features of activation policies in different countries. At the same time, Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2004) argue that the convergence is, however, most prominent on the level of a common rhetoric while "this homogeneity of words is certainly neither based on a homogeneity of values, nor of substance of programmes, rights and entitlements" (p. 434). Furthermore, they underline the high degree of discretion as a common characteristic in most countries, which also in part accounts for their diversity. They argue that discretion can work in many ways, "it may be implemented in law (the degree to which regulations are mandatory or

8 Barbier and Mayerhofer (2004) discuss also the possibility of a third type but they argue that it is not possible to contend a third, "continental"type ideal type of activation. However, more recent contributions (see e.g. Aurich, 2011) provide evidence of a more distinct path of activation in continental welfare states.

not) but may also depend on informal rules operating at street-level delivery" (p. 434).

Comparing different European countries, Clasen and Clegg (2006), too, show how activation policies are nested in quite different trajectories of unemployment policy adaptation. Clasen and Clegg distinguish three main orientations in unemployment policy reform. The first orientation is given by the activation of benefits, which means that unemployment protection is reformed in order to use the provision of temporary support as a lever to get the unemployed closer to the labour market and to modify labour market transitions. The second orientation consists of the increased coordination of unemployment protection with other policy streams and institutions, in particular the closer collaboration between administrations traditionally concerned with the provision of income protection and counselling, placement and training services. In this sense, programmatic reorientation and institutional reforms in labour market policy are seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing. The third main orientation concerns eligibility criteria and entitlements for benefits and services during unemployment. According to Clasen and Clegg (2006), there is a tendency towards the homogenisation of unemployment support. Traditional unemployment insurance systems and, more generally, differentiated and two-tier (insurance and assistance) unemployment support schemes are increasingly standardised and aligned. However, this homogenisation of unemployment support

> can in principle take a variety of forms, between the extremes of downward alignment of transfers on those traditionally poorly protected, and something closer to the generalization to all groups on conditions once available only to workers in stable employment. (p. 533)

Against the background of these three main policy orientations, Clasen and Clegg underline "that—'beyond activation'—there is actually no single, universal dynamic of adaptation of unemployment protection systems to post-industrial labour markets in the recent reform trajectories of different countries" (p. 534). More recently, Clasen and Clegg (2012) underlined, however, a multi-faceted process of institutional realignment involved in contemporary labour market policy change, referring to this process as a triple integration

towards a new institutional template for a transformed employment structure. According to them,

> adapting labour market policy to the transformed employment structure means challenging inherited "divisions of institutional labour" between labour market and social security policy, between income maintenance and poverty relief programmes, and between provisions for different risk-groups in the working age population. (p. 136)

In this sense, Clasen and Clegg argue that the politics of triple integration are likely to produce further convergence on this new institutional template. Also Dingeldey (2007, 2011) showed that, although single countries seem to align themselves to a particular welfare state type, within the paradigm of activation there are different paths and an ongoing divergence in the transformation of the welfare state. In her comparative analysis of activating labour market policies in Denmark, Germany and the UK, Dingeldey (2007, 2011) points out that different reform paths lead to different mixes of workfare and enabling policies and to different levels of de-commodification and (re-)commodification. Concepts that address the transformation of the welfare state share the idea that traditional policies aiming at de-commidification should be increasingly replaced with policies emphasising (re-)commodification. However, Dingeldey (2007) reconstructs the workfare approach and the enabling approach as ideal types in order to get theoretical standards against which the empirical cases of active labour market policies are compared. Dingeldey provides evidence that confirms the hypothesis of a paradigm shift and shows that the countries move in the same direction. At the same time, relative differences between the countries have been maintained and different paths and policy mixes persist.

Similarly, Serrano Pascual (2007) underlines that, in spite of the convergence towards activation, this process results in very different policies, depending on the role of various institutional and ideological factors. Serrano Pascual's approach identifies different activation regimes as the basis for explaining, on the one hand, convergence on main features, such as the increase in availability assessments, shortening of benefit periods, increasing use of sanctions, wider redefinition of suitable jobs and the expansion of

target groups, and, on the other hand, significant national differences in the content and the degree of activation programmes. According to Serrano Pascual (2007)

> activation regimes are the outcome of the fragile balance of power between the different actors involved in the design and implementation of these activation policies and of all the hegemonic regulatory and cognitive benchmarks that shape a community's understanding of the social exclusion problem. (p. 276)

Thus, the attempt to distinguish between different activation regimes has to take into account both the dimension of governance structures and institutional settings as well as the dimension given by hegemonic regulatory assumptions, i.e. assumptions regarding the meaning of work, the responsibility for social exclusion, the meaning of citizenship and the duties of job seekers, which act as cultural frames that not only influence policy design but serve as the very basic regulatory foundation and justification of these policies and its resulting practices. Comparing the reform processes in different European countries against this theoretical background, Serrano Pascual comes up with a classification of activation regimes based on two factors influencing the type of activation model. The first relates to the prevailing modes of "managing" individuals, i.e. the different ways in which the behaviour and attitudes of the unemployed are regulated. According to Serrano Pascual (2007), they "span the two extremes of, on the one hand, a mode characterized by *moral therapeutic management* of individuals' behaviour and on the other, a mode of intervention based on *matching* workers' skills and labour costs to the new economic circumstances" (p. 294). The second factor relates to the specific content of the social contract between the unemployed person and the State, or, "in other words the (im)balance between rights and duties or the balance of the quid pro quo" (p. 299). On this basis, Serrano Pascual identifies trends in the modes of political and regulatory governance of activation and distinguishes ideal types of different activation regimes[9]. At

9 Serrano Pascual distinguishes an Economic Springboard Regime (best represented by the UK), a Civic Contractualism Regime (represented, for example, by the Netherlands), an Autonomous Citizen Regime (best represented by Sweden), a Fragmented Provision Regime (represented by Spain and Italy) and a Minimalist Disciplinary Regime (represented, for example, by Portugal and the Czech Republic).

the same time, he underlines their common dilemmas or the fundamental ambiguity of the activation paradigm, which is less due to conceptual weaknesses of different models but reflects the contradiction of the current conditions in post-industrial societies. As Serrano Pascual (2007) points out, "the spread of different forms of the activation paradigm should be understood in this context. The risk is that this paradigm will replace political regulation of the market with moral regulation of behaviour." (p. 313).

Weishaupt (2010a) provides a very profound and careful comparison of the experiences in the shift towards activation in Western Europe taking particularly into account six countries representing different welfare regimes, namely Ireland, the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. As analytical framework, Weishaupt uses a grid of four analytical dimensions, which, taken together, "comprise the core elements located at the work welfare nexus of any modern labour market" (p. 62). The first of these dimensions is the ideational dimension concerning the normative and cognitive underpinnings of labour market policies. The second one is the organisational dimension, which includes the aspects dealing with the governance and delivery of labour market services. The third is the financial dimension concerned with both the sources of revenue as well as with the type and level of expenditure. The fourth dimension, finally, is the work-incentive dimension concerning both the negative and positive incentive structures of labour market policy regimes. The analysis confirms the trend towards convergence, first and foremost on the ideational dimension. As Weishaupt (2010a) points out,

> by attributing joblessness to jobseekers' motivation and qualifications, policymakers increasingly believe in their ability to affect the level of unemployment through supply-side labour market policies. This cognitive shift has been accompanied by a normative reorientation and a new political agenda. Work is now seen as the best form of welfare, and policymakers of almost all political spectrums openly embrace the concept of 'mutual obligations'. With this turn to activation, the political agenda is no longer to merely reduce unemployment, but to activate all 'able bodied' persons, through which individual achievement and self-reliance is maximized, welfare state dependency reduced, and the sustainability of the European Social Model attained. (p. 246)

This ideational convergence has led to changes and convergence also on the organisational level. Weishaupt traces reform trajectories of public employment services, in line with the prescription of New Public Management Theories and international and supranational recommendations. Against this backgorund, Weishaupt discusses the usefulness of traditional regime typologies after the shift towards activation. On the basis of the analysis of the different country cases, Weishaupt argues that Nordic countries have become increasingly concerned with cost containment, the effectiveness of their labour market programmes and the reorganisation of their employment and training services introducing quasi-market mechanisms and reducing the influence of the social partners. These developments, together with the diffusion of a growing self-reliance discourse, have moved the Nordic countries closer to the liberal tradition of the Anglophone world. At the same time, the developments in the Anglophone cases show some clear elements of a move towards more state-led intervention and, hence, towards a more service-centred model traditionally associated with the Nordic models. In the continental cases, finally, there is evidence of tendencies which aspire to both the liberal and the socialdemocratic tradition. Continental countries

> have increasingly adopted activation measures for insured workers and social assistance recipients alike, have engaged in attempts to bring employment and welfare services closer together—thus moving toward a more universal approach—introduced quasi-market mechanisms for the selection of providers delivering occupational skills courses, expanded their low-wage sectors, and most recently began to offer state assistance and leadership in childcare facilities. (Weishaupt, 2010a, p. 250)

These developments confirm, concomitantly, both a stronger reliance on market mechanisms and a stronger interventionist role for the state and the challenging of core elements of the continental regime type, including the principles of subsidiarity, social insurance and the strong male breadwinner model. In this sense, Weishaupt shows the persistence of historically-grown labour market policy instruments pointing out at the same time that the activation paradigm has led to the mutual adoption of elements from both the liberal and the socialdemocratic tradition and, thus, to an institutional hy-

bridisation of traditional regime types, which is most pronounced in continental countries.

Bonoli (2010) points out cross-national differences in active labour market policies in terms of both extent and overall orientation. Referring to the distinction of two general approaches of activation, a human investment-oriented one versus a negative incentive-oriented one, Bonoli (2010) acknowledges that such dichotomic juxtapositions[10] may offer "a useful starting point in making sense of an ambiguous concept" (p. 439), but he also points to the risks of oversimplification and value judgement. Bonoli instead proposes two main dimensions of activation, which have to be examined separately. The first one "concerns the extent to which the objective of a policy is to put people back into demand driven market employment, provided either by private or public employers" (p. 439) while the second one "refers to the extent to which programs are based on investing in jobless people's human capital" (p. 440). Combining the two dimensions, Bonoli defines four different activation types, labelled as incentive reinforcement, employment assistance, occupation, and upskilling (or human capital investment). The incentive reinforcement type refers to measures aimed at strengthening work incentives in various ways, e.g. by curtailing benefits, by making benefit receipt conditional on participation in work schemes or other labour market programmes and/or the introduction of sanction systems. The employment assistance type refers to measures intended to remove obstacles to labour market participation, such as placement and matching services and/or counselling and job subsidies, but also additional services, e.g. for childcare. The occupation type is not primarily concerned with labour market (re-)entry, but its focus lies on keeping unemployed people busy and on preventing the depletion of human capital. Corresponding measures mainly consist of job creation and work experience programmes in the public or the non-for-profit sector. Finally, the upskilling type is distinguished by both high investment in human capital and a strong pro-market employment orientation providing better job chances through upgrading vocational training. Comparing the expenditure profiles for active labour market policies in different countries, Bonoli shows

10 Bonoli refers to Torfing's (1999) distinction between "offensive" and "defensive" workfare, to the concept of "positive" and "negative" activation coined by Taylor-Gooby (2004) and to Barbier's (2004) juxtaposition of "liberal" and "universalistic" activation.

how dramatically the role of these instruments changes over time. However, at the same time, there seems to be little regularity in the political determinants of active labour market policy and both strong institutional and ideational effects are contained in the interaction between economic development and labour market policy responses. However, Bonoli's analysis (2010) confirms also a strong push towards activation since the, 1990s which has spanned across different regimes, "in fact, all the countries covered (except Italy) turned to the activation paradigm in labor-market policy, putting emphasis on employment assistance and on the reinforcement of work incentives" (p. 451). This typology proposed by Bonoli is used also in Graziano's analysis (2012) aimed at assessing the EU-induced convergence in domestic activation policies in the European Union. Graziano compares the expenditure profiles of different European countries (France, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden and Finland) and shows that some convergence between the different countries has occurred, but, rather than in the direction of upskilling supported by the EU recommendations, the convergence can be seen most clearly with respect to the employment assistance type, since all countries have increased their spending in this area. In this sense, Graziano confirms only limited and selective EU-induced policy diffusion with respect to domestic activation policies. Besides the comparison of expenditure profiles, Graziano also considers the dimension of governance, showing that also the governance of activation remains quite different throughout the European Union. Although both marketisation and decentralisation processes can be observed in all countries taken into account, EU-induced influence in governance has concerned particularly those countries with more hierarchical and procedural governance traditions and with higher availment of EU resources such as the European Social Fund (Graziano, 2012).

Aurich (2011) also argues for a comparative model of activation based on its different dimensions. The framework put forward by Aurich adds a new type of coercive welfare to the common distinction between generous and strict activation. Aurich uses the two dimensions of incentive creation and active support to assess change in unemployment policy. The resulting model displays four different types of unemployment policy logics, the logic of de-commodification associated with an "old passive" welfare regime, and the two logics commonly associated with activation, either with the focus

on the creation of incentives (re-commodification policies) or with the focus on the provision of active support (enabling policies). The fourth logic stands for a hybrid space in between and is labeled as coercive welfare. Against this conceptual framework, Aurich analyses three formerly quite different welfare states, Denmark, Germany and the UK. The analysis not only confirms significant changes in unemployment policy, but also reveals some new lines of division among these countries. While Denmark as well as the UK endorsed a strategy that pursued both the objectives of increased incentive creation and more active support and, thus, moved towards the coercive welfare type, Germany applied different models of activation to different groups, pursuing a more enabling strategy with insurance recipients and a more re-commodifying one with assistance (Hartz IV) recipients. According to Aurich (2011), these results "demonstrate surprising similarities between countries formerly seen as pursuing distinct risk-management approaches in terms of opposing types of activation, and in terms of overall welfare regime" (p. 313). Aurich argues for a distinct path of activation on continental countries and points out that gradual developments and new diversity indicate cross-convergence among countries, rather than gradual convergence or persistent diversity.

Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide (2014) focus on the local dimension of activation, pointing out the crucial role of additional services for the success of integrated activation policies. The provision of additional social services is an essential dimension of activation policies and can make a great difference and especially for the inclusion of long-term unemployed, non-nationals, low-skilled and the increasing number of young people not in employment, education or training. Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide analyse the role these services play in different countries. They propose a typology which takes into account the different roles and forms of employment and additional social services relevant for activation policies. Comparing expenditure data for both employment policies and additional services, Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide distinguish four patterns of domestic activation policies and social services, labelled as comprehensive activation, compensatory welfare states, emerging activation regimes and residual regimes. Comprehensive activation is characterised by strong service-based labour market policies and, in spite of their reduction of expenditures, Denmark, Sweden

and Norway are still the front-runners of this model, with the highest expenditure on active labour market policies, the highest replacement rates and the highest expenditure for family, education, employment and other social services. Another group of mostly continental European countries, labelled as compensatory welfare states on the move to more active employment policies, rely still more strongly on compensatory labour market policies. Their transfer-oriented approach is characterised by a high share of expenditure for compensatory policies and a lower share of expenditure for active labour market policies and, particularly, for employment and social services. A third group of countries, labelled as emerging activation regimes, is composed of mostly Southern and Eastern European countries with slightly lower than average expenditure rates for labour market policies in general and, as their most distinct element, with low investments in employment, family and other social services. Residual labour market policies, lastly, can be found in other Central and Southern European countries but also in the United Kingdom. This pattern is characterised by an expenditure rate for social policies clearly under the European average, by low social protection for the unemployed and by high incentives for taking up a new job. With the remarkable exception of the UK, the investment in employment and social services is also low. In sum, Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide show that taking into account also the component of employment and additional social services allows different types of inclusive activation regimes across European countries to be distinguished. Additional to this expenditure data-based typology, Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide take into account also the governance dimension of inclusive activation and the organisational challenges at the local and regional meso-level, where activation really takes place. Taking one country as an example for each regime type and the UK as a workfare variant of the residual model, Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide analyse the countries' governance structure in reference to the five organisational strategies pointed out by van Berkel et al. (2012b), namely systemic coordination, cooperation, public-private partnerships, decentralisation of public employment services and individualised forms of support and control. Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide (2014) emphasise that the governance of activation is confronted with manifold challenges, such as fragmented and overlapping competencies, difficulties in coordinating job placement and social services and,

more generally, conflicts between national, regional and local levels. At the same time, Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide argue that these organisational challenges are much more similar in different countries than expected on the basis of different expenditure types, and emphasise that this dimension of "the organisational challenges of a coordinated provision of employment and social services should therefore be a core question of welfare and employment studies aimed at inclusive forms of activation." (p. 22).

The service component of activation and the concrete organisation of benefit and service provision are indeed increasingly the focus of attention, not least against the background of the recent crisis and a growing need for inclusive activation based on the combination of sufficient income provision, active labour market policies and access to social services in different European countries. Heidenreich et al. (2014) analyse strategies of active inclusion in Europe and identify, similar to the different patterns outlined above, three different active inclusion regimes in Europe, a comprehensive inclusion regime in the Scandinavian countries characterised by relatively high levels of minimum income, activation and social services, a redistributive inclusion regime mostly in continental European countries with a lower level of services and a minimum inclusion regime in East and Southern European countries less developed in all the three dimensions. However, again Heidenreich et al. (2014) emphasise that these institutional patterns do not fully explain the impact on national patterns and dynamics of deprivation and poverty in different countries. Decisive for understanding the chances of leaving poverty and employment is also the concrete organisation of activation and service and benefits provision.

All these contributions confirm the broad shift towards activation and a general convergence on its ideational dimension and central features. At the same time, the literature emphasises persisting differences, different paths, trajectories and lines of divisions not only among regimes or country specific activation strategies, but also within and underneath national frameworks. Although the activation paradigm and its essential assumptions determine the programmatic of welfare state intervention all over Europe, this programmatic also implicates the abandonment of and the departure from the idea of a "one-size-fits-all" welfare state towards the idea of a more decentred (and decentralised) and individualised (and individually contractualised)

and thus more diversified and interactive state intervention. In this sense, higher degrees of lower level discretion are indeed an intrinsic feature of activation and a common characteristic of different contexts, but at the same time they contribute to very different results in terms of what activation eventually means. Accordingly, comparative welfare state research is increasingly also looking at the local dimension of activation (Künzel, 2012; Andreotti et al., 2012; Johansson & Koch, 2016; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016) as well as at its service component, and as a consequence at processes of local governance and street-level delivery (van Berkel et al., 2011; 2012a, 2017).

1.3.3 Towards a social investment state

As pointed out, welfare state development has to be understood also as the result of new political ideas and commitments. Different scholars sustain that from the mid-1990s a new idea of welfare as social investment has increasingly gained traction and importance also as a counterweight to the harsh neoliberal attack on the welfare state, which was said to create dependency and an ever-burgeoning public debt (Lessenich, 2009; Weishaupt, 2010a; Morel et al., 2012; Hemerijick, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2017). Although the trigger for the activation turn was the neoliberal idea of the self-reliant economic citizen, the shift towards activation is often contextualized within the move towards a social investment approach, too. Anyway, the idea of social investment remains rather ambiguous and its early interpretations differ from considering it nothing but a 'wolf in new sheep's clothing' (see e.g. Peck and Tickell, 2002) to depicting it as a new chapter after neoliberalism (see e.g. Larner and Craig, 2005). Within the scholarly literature on welfare state development there is, however, a certain consensus on social investment as the currently predominant perspective for welfare state development or even as a new wave of welfare state transformation (Midgley, 2001; Lister, 2003; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003, 2006; Perkins et al. 2004; Mahon, 2010; Hemerijck, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2017; Jenson, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2017; Morel et al., 2012; Astor et al., 2017).

According to Morel et al. (2012), there is no unified theory or single intellectual source behind the new ideas concerning the role and the shape of the welfare state and the labels used for putting them forward. However, what these ideas have in common is that they emphasise the productive

potential of social policy and provide a new economic rationale for welfare state intervention. Against the background of increasing polarisations, poverty rates, problems and costs of social inclusion, particularly in the countries which had gone furthest in their implementation of neoliberal policies, neoliberal social prescriptions have lost their traction and have been increasingly criticised. At the same time, the post-war and male-breadwinner- oriented welfare state, especially in its continental variant, turned out to be ill-equipped to deal with the challenges and new social risks resulting from the transition to a post-industrial era with its new economy and increasing social and demographic transformations. These criticisms and challenges gave rise to the call for the modernisation of the welfare state

> in order to address the issues of growing poverty and social exclusion, to better respond to the new needs and new social risk structures of contemporary society, to make welfare systems sustainable, and to make them 'productive' in the sense that they should promote and support employment and economic growth. (Morel et al., 2012, p. 9)

Jensen (2012a, 2012b) points out the shared premises of the social investment perspective and emphasises its more positive role of the state compared to a neoliberal perspective. According to Jensen (2010), the emphasis of the social investment perspective is "on policies for children and their families, on the future more than the present and on the societal as well as individual advantages of social investments" (p. 28). Accordingly, a crucial aspect of social investment is the notion of preventive and proactive intervention, which should allow individuals and families to maintain the responsibility for their well-being through market income and intrafamily exchanges. This way, welfare dependency and pressures on the welfare state should be lessened and the state should concentrate on its proactive role as a social investor. Jenson identifies three key elements in the programmatic of the social investment perspective. The first is the notion of constant engagement in learning programmes as the main guarantee for individuals' security instead of "passive" protection when markets fail.

> Security has come to mean the capacity to confront challenges and adapt, via life-long learning to acquire new or up-date old skills as well as via early childhood learning. The objective of social policy is captured by its dominant metaphor. It is of a trampoline rather than a protective shield or a safety net; policy instruments should be designed to bounce people back into the labour market if for one reason or another they fall out of it. (Jenson, 2012a, p. 29)

The second key element is the orientation to the future. The idea of social investment obviously implies a certain notion of time and the reframing of welfare state intervention from "passive" spending and traditional policies in the here and now towards "investments" and policies that should prevent, prepare rather than repair, and pay off in the future. The third and last key element regards the link between individuals' circumstances and the collective well-being. The social investment perspective promotes the idea that investments in individuals are beneficial and pay off for the community as a whole. Investing measures in the present shall break cycles of poverty, enhance school success and individual employability, lessen crime and, thus, benefit everyone in the long run, not least by promising to limit future expenditures (Jenson, 2012a).

Hemerijck (2012a, 2013) traces and analyses this "social investment turn towards capacitating solidarity" (2012a, p. 46) and argues that it indeed marks a new distinct phase of welfare state configuration. According to Hemerijck, the political disenchantment of neoliberalism after the mid-1990s has led to electoral success for the centre-left in different European countries. This new political lineup and policy platform agreed on the need to transform the welfare state into an activating and capacity-building- oriented one. Intellectually, this new centre-left has been inspired by Giddens' idea (1998) of the "third way", but as has been pointed out above, both the OECD and the EU also began to converge on the idea of social investment.

A milestone, not only in the scholarly literature but also for the direction of the European debate, was the report commissioned in 2001 under the Belgian Presidency of the EU from a group of scholars headed by Esping-Andersen and afterwards published under the programmatic title *Why We Need a New Welfare State* (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). According to Hemerijck (2012a), the most important conceptual contribution of this proposal for a

new welfare architecture has been its life-course perspective in rethinking welfare provision, which allows us "to identify and to explicate better the intricate relationships that link care for children, the elderly and other vulnerable groups, to female employment and changing family structures." (p. 48). In this context, social investment advocates the reallocation of social expenditures from social insurance and pensions towards active labour market policy, early childhood education and vocational training and family services in order to foster employment and productivity of both men and women in the knowledge-based postindustrial economy. Of course, the economics of social investment do not purport quick fixes compared to the straightforward micro or macro solutions devised by neoclassical or post-Keynesian theories. However, it must be stressed that "the social investment perspective does bring social policy as a potentially positive contributor to growth, competitiveness, social progress and political resilience back into the equation" (p. 50). In this sense, the economics of social investment on the one hand shares a nuanced reappreciation of Keynesian legacies combined, on the other hand, with a strong supply-side focus typical for a neoliberal approach. But, as Jenson (2012a) argues,

> in contrast to the great wars pitting neoliberal monetarists against Keynesians, social investment was presented as a series of adjustments, a way of getting the incentives right or smoothing out the negative consequences of the interactions between markets and states. It was, in other words, an approach that retained much that was familiar from neoliberalism's universe of political discourse while returning to some of the social objectives of equity and even equality that underpinned Keynesian welfare regimes …. Social policy gurus might have had to adapt their conceptual apparatus in order to be heard, but little dramatic partisan debate or political conflict within the state or international organisations was required. The OECD and other international agencies as well as national ministries of finance, all surrounded by their social policy experts, could begin to pay more attention to the social, without being forced to give up their preferred world views or policy instruments. The social investment perspective arrived more on the economistic "little cat feet" of fiscally-based reform than with the *Strum* [*sic*] *und Drang* of neoliberalism's "new politics". (p. 39)

What is important in this context, however, is the rediscovery and the reappraisal of the state in its new role as social investor and, as it will be pointed out later, the impact of this perspective on the state's citizenship practices.[11]

The real stress test for the new social investment state has been the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis, which has caused a period of severe recession across Europe. Hemerijck (2012b) warned of the condemnation of social investment as one of the casualties of the crisis, arguing that

> the case for social investment policy is as strong, if not stronger, than before 2008. With fewer active persons supporting ever more dependents, low labour market participation is simply no longer affordable with the demographic changes now taking effect across the EU. (p. 87)

In fact, the social investment perspective has received renewed impetus with the "social investment package" adopted by the European Commission (2013b) and intended to guide the member states in using their social budgets more efficiently and effectively to ensure adequate and sustainable social protection and in strengthening people's current and future capacities in order to improve their employability and participation both in the labour market and, generally, in society. The social investment package focuses on integrated packages of benefits and services that should help people throughout their lives and achieve sustainable positive social outcomes. In this sense, it emphasises prevention rather than cure in order to reduce the need for benefits, assuring, in this way, that society can afford to help when people need support. Moreover, it explicitly calls for investing in children and young people to increase their opportunities in life.

However, different scholars have raised critical aspects of the social investment perspective both in relation to its effective impact on gender equality (Jenson, 2009) as well as regarding the social distribution of its benefits and its effective impact on poverty reduction (Cantillon, 2011; van Lancker, 2012; Daly, 2012; Pintelon et al., 2013, Taylor-Gooby et al., 2014; van Vliet & Wang 2015; Bengtsson et al., 2017). With respect to active labour market policy, it has

11 For a critical analysis of the impact of the social investment perspective on social work see, e.g. Gray (2014).

been pointed out (Bonoli, 2010, 2012; Graziano, 2012) that convergence can be found in terms of employment assistance and incentive reinforcement rather than long-term-oriented upskilling and that governments are more inclined to push in the direction of fast labour market entry into low-skilled jobs. As Bonoli (2012) makes the point,

> yet the reluctance of European countries to embark on a major re-training for the low-skilled offensive seems a real obstacle to the deployment of the social investment strategy. The imbalance between supply and demand in the low-skilled segment of the labour market is such that standard compensatory measures (tax credits, family benefits) alone are unlikely to prevent poverty, child poverty, and the transmission of disadvantage across generations: precisely the evils that social investment advocates want to get rid of. (p. 201)

Laruffa (2017) challenges the claim that social investment would be a shift away from neoliberalism as the ideology of welfare retrenchment and the minimal state. Based on a more accurate definition of neoliberalism, Laruffa (2017) argues that social investment reflects four central characteristics of neoliberalism, namely "the de-politicisation of the economy and of welfare reform; the economic understanding of the state; the extension of economic rationale to non-economic domains; and the anthropology of human capital" (p. 1). In this sense, Laruffa argues that, although social investment is preferable to welfare retrenchment, it promotes the same idea of citizenship as neoliberalism. Leibetseder (2017) takes up the critique of social investment as an outright neoliberal reform. Analysing the content of reform instruments embedded in the Social Investment Package, Leibetseder points out the inherent ambivalence of social investment policies that makes it impossible to assess these policies, neither as being neoliberal, nor as being the opposite.

1.4 Activation and the Changing Landscapes of Citizenship

Even more qualitative approaches to welfare state development have often focused mainly on the role and the diffusion of ideas in policy making rather than on implicit normative shifts of policy development from a citizens' perspective of policy taking and on their impacts on social rights. There is, how-

ever, a growing body of literature which discusses deeper normative change of activation and social investment to what is understood as the patterns of social citizenship (Andersen et al., 2005; Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011; Taylor-Gooby, 2009; Dwyer, 2010; Evers & Guillemard, 2013; Jenson, 2012b; Lister, 2003, 2013; Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Patrick, 2017). The notion of citizenship as conceptualised by Marshall (1950) points out how citizenship as the membership of a political community has been institutionalised in a sequence of three stages, as development of civil rights in the 18th, political rights in the 19th and, eventually, social rights in the 20th century. In the 20th century

> social integration spread from the sphere of sentiment and patriotism into that of material enjoyment. The components of a civilised and cultural life, formerly the monopoly of a few, were brought progressively within reach of the many, who were encouraged thereby to stretch out their hand towards those that still eluded their grasp. The dimension of inequality strengthened the demand for its abolition, at least with regards to the essentials of social welfare. (p. 47)

This social dimension of citizenship developed hand in hand with the emergence of the welfare state and the introduction of social security schemes, redistributive benefits, cash entitlements and social services. As Marshall (1950) points out, the social dimension of citizenship refers to

> the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society. (p. 11)

This significant extension of what it means to be a citizen was possible only against the background of a broad political consensus with regard to the definition of the criteria for the organisation of social solidarity and, thus, on responsibilities, extensions and funding of the welfare state. Marshall's starting point for conceptualising citizenship is, obviously,

> the question of how to reconcile the status of the citizen—who, as such, is recognized as a member of a single community and as being equal in terms

> of rights and obligations to other citizens—with the inequality observed in a class-based society. (Evers & Guillemard, 2013, p. 5)

The extension of citizenship to social rights was, thus, not intended to eradicate inequality entirely but to mitigate it by correcting, at least to some extent, the injustices caused by the capitalist market. By providing a certain degree of social protection, the welfare state indeed constitutes the attempt to prevent social and economic exclusions that civil and political rights on their own could not avoid. This way the welfare state should, on the one hand, ensure social cohesion and solidarity and, on the other, entitle the individual to live a life as a free and self-determined person. Accordingly, Marshall sees civil, political and social rights and freedoms as interdependent and as reinforcing one another in the democratic and liberal project of the welfare state. However, as Evers and Guillemard (2013) remark, "the extension of citizenship, while inconceivable without the establishment of rights, should nevertheless not be confused with a set of rights" (p. 5). Social citizenship is not entirely enshrined in a fixed set of guaranteed rights but it necessarily involves shared convictions, values and civic practices. The citizen can, on the one hand, claim certain rights and entitlements, but, on the other, it is required of the citizen "that his acts should be inspired by a lively sense of responsibility towards the welfare of the community" (Marshall, 1950, p. 70). In this sense, the conception of citizenship presupposes a balance between rights and entitlements to ensure the social integration of citizens into the community, and duties and obligations that individual citizens in return have towards the community. These two sides of citizenship are often referred to as "passive citizenship" linked to rights and entitlements and, as a counterpart, as "active citizenship" regarding citizens' duties and responsibilities. However, the notion of active citizenship leaves much room for interpretation and Marshall himself did not go into detail about the exact spelling out of rights and obligations (Evers & Guillemard, 2013). Instead of a universal principle for the definition of rights and duties, citizenship implies "a vision of what each inhabitant of a society could become, an image for societies and their citizens to strive for." (Johansson & Hvinden, 2013, p. 42). From this vision the concrete political answers for balancing rights and obligations must be derived. Taylor-Gooby (2009) highlights the reframing of social citizenship within the

logic of individual rational action during the last decades. Reframing citizenship first and foremost in terms of choices and opportunities available to the individual citizens and emphasising the active dimension of citizenship while weakening (and depreciating) its so-called passive dimension, represents a significant shift from a more solidaristic notion of citizenship to a more individualistic one.

This reframing of citizenship has gained in attention and is discussed in relation to its normative assumptions and its practical implications for citizens and society. Newman and Tonkens (2011) show that new formations of citizenship occupy a central place in welfare state modernisation across Europe and beyond.

> A range of governmental and political projects swirl around the remaking of citizenship: the restoration of national identity, the responses to the challenges of social cohesion in a globalising world and the attempt to reinvent relationships between people and the state. But at the centre of these struggles are notions of the 'active' citizen: one who is no longer dependent on the welfare state and who is willing to take full part in the remaking of modern societies. (p. 9)

The character of this turn in conceptualising citizenship can be interpreted and labelled very differently, depending on which ideas are highlighted. Critical observers, however, point out not only the increasing conditionality but also an increasing moralisation of welfare (Dean, 2007; Rodger, 2008) and, in this sense, a turn towards an ambiguous pedagogical programmatic of the state (Newman, 2010). Conditionality is already known in Marshall's concept of citizenship and the idea of a right balance between rights and obligations has always been a central issue in the assumptions related to citizenship. However,

> what is critical and makes a difference to this past is what we would call 'educational' conditionality'. Under this label we would place those measures where a service or benefit is dependent on certain achievements, actions or types of behavior expected while it is being given, something that often implies a more or less formalized contract on the mutual obligations being drawn up at the outset. (Evers & Guillemard, 2013, p. 23)

Gilbert (2013) points out the normative shift from an emphasis on welfare provisions as social rights of citizenship to the social responsibilities of benefit recipients to behave well and to become independent as quickly as possible. As Gilbert points out, "this shift is embodied in the contractual agreements/activation/action plans that beneficiaries of public benefits are being required to develop, sign and implement" (p. 88). According to Clarke's analysis of citizenship under New Labour, these shifts and recalibrations must be understood as a political and governmental project of remaking the relations between the state and its citizens, which increasingly differentiates the population and applies different practices to different target groups (Clarke, 2005). This aspect is considered also by Lister (2013), who points out that

> the "active" state was contrasted not only with a "passive" welfare state but also, through the notion of personalization, with a one-size-fits-all welfare state. More personalized forms of delivery, often in partnership with the third and private sectors, spell greater discretion and reduced accountability. (p. 141)

The idea of a more active welfare state and the attempt to change individual behaviour through an increase in the conditionality of social rights has affected different areas of the welfare state. However, the most evident and important shift can be observed in the reforms related to active labour market policies and income maintenance systems (Clasen & Clegg, 2007). Betzelt and Bothfeld (2011) provide a comparative analysis of the impact of activation policies from a citizens' perspective. This focus is particularly interesting as comparative research usually focuses on institutional analyses of single programmes or policy outcomes on the macro level, which do not take into account the deeper normative change to the patterns of social citizenship, i.e. the logic of welfare provision and the principles of redistribution on the basis of citizens' social rights. Betzelt and Bothfeld (2011) point out that activation policies risk losing sight of the state's responsibility for protecting its citizens' autonomy as the normative backbone of the modern democratic welfare state and this way also jeopardise the fine web of social solidarity, which cannot be activated along the principle of "deservingness". What is also interesting in Betzelt and Bothfeld's analysis is that it challeng-

es or somehow overcomes the dichotomic juxtaposition between the active and passive side of social citizenship and points out its participatory dimension. Similarly, Johansson and Hvinden (2013) propose a more relational approach to citizenship that

> avoids a rigid divide between passive and active dimensions of social citizenship (regardless of how "passive" and "active" are construed), and instead seeks to view these two aspects as interdependent and mutually enforcing one another. (p. 50)

What is particularly interesting in this context, however, is the emphasis Johansson and Hvinden put on citizens' participation and agency. While Marshall's conception focuses on citizenship mainly as a status, Johansson and Hvinden (2013) stress the importance of recognising citizenship as a practice, "that is to say, something exercised by citizens, and not simply a set of rights and duties" (pp. 46f). This approach allows for seeing citizens as agents who can make individual choices and participate in decision-making processes. Reconsidering the participatory dimension of citizenship overcomes a view of citizens either as passive benefit recipients or as being obliged to be active. Instead, they can be recognized as subjects, agents who can play a more active role in handling their welfare by developing their strategies and by making their voice heard in relation to public services (Johansson & Hvinden, 2013; Lister, 2007).

This relational perspective is particularly relevant for looking at the practice of activation, especially because of the aspects pointed out above, namely that activation policies implicate the move away from a "one-fits-all" welfare state, more lower-level discretion and more individualised service provision. Although the recalibration of rights and duties in the name of activation has obviously changed the "hard" legal framework on the formal side of activation policies, these policies have, anyway, to be put in practice by different actors. The interesting questions are, thus, whether "activation work" eventually allows for a practice of citizenship and how the assumptive concepts of citizenship affect the practice of activation at street level (Nothdurfter, 2016). Taylor-Gooby (2009) states that

> the cultural penumbra of social citizenship is of considerable importance in the day-to-day operation of welfare states. The law cannot be everywhere, and is most often absent when the interests of more vulnerable groups are concerned: Rights to benefits are of substantially less value if those entitled do not claim them because they are stigmatised or if they simply do not believe that the government is willing to meet their needs. (p. 5)

Van Berkel (2011) looks at the local and street-level implementation of activation policies, pointing out that

> what exactly happens in the interactions between frontline workers and recipients is something we know very little about: We know a lot more about "official" policies than about policy practices. At the same time, these interactions are quite important from the point of view of recipients. In these interactions, decisions are made concerning the nature and content of activation, the assessment of people's situation, the evaluation of their behaviour, sanctioning and so on. These decisions are, of course, structured by national and local policy decisions. Nevertheless the discretionary room that frontline workers have implies that their decisions are never merely an implementation of official rules and regulations, especially where decisions concerning activation are at stake. (pp. 212f)

He shows how the emphasis on deregulated and individualised service provision in the context of activation leads to a stronger and far more discretionary role of local welfare agencies and frontline workers in determining what social citizenship eventually means for individual social assistance recipients.

> Nevertheless the social citizenship parameters as laid down in national regulations and the financial incentive structure in which municipalities operate still leave unprecedented room for local, organizational and frontline work decision-making in the area of activation social assistance recipients. In principle, this has advantages as it allows individual needs, circumstances and ambitions to be taken into account when deciding about specific interventions. But there are no checks and balances that actually ensure that individual needs

> guide decision-making processes at the individual level: Other considerations, such as financial concerns, organizational capacities or frontline workers' resources, may be more important or even dominant. (p. 215)

In this sense, activation reforms have indeed changed the landscapes of citizenship, not only in terms of the recalibration of rights and duties in the formal policy framework, but also, as van Berkel (2011) puts it, by "a process of localization (municipalization) and individualization of citizenship" (p. 214). In this context, the frontline work in activation services assumes a crucial role in determining what activation and social citizenship eventually mean for citizens in their role(s) as clients, service users, benefit recipients and "targets" for activation.

2. Activation in Practice — Implementing Activation Policies and Activation Service Delivery

Taking up central questions of the policy implementation debate (Hill & Hupe, 2009), the introduction to the second chapter challenges the idea of policy formation and policy implementation as separate processes by highlighting the mutual interrelations between formal and operational policy (Carmel & Papadoupolos, 2009). Against the background of such a policy-action relationship perspective (Barrett & Fudge, 1981) and the understanding of policy as "shaped, understood, enacted and experienced in a plurality of sites by a plurality of actors in a dispersed field of power" (Newman, 2007, p. 365), the chapter points out that questions related to the dimension of governance and organisation of activation policies and services are not mere neutral technical issues, but that they are shaping what is produced as activation policies on the ground (or as real-world solutions on the frontline of services) and, in this sense, highly political.

Following the general idea that welfare state reforms affect at the same time not only welfare state arrangements and programmatic characteristics of social policies but also the dimension of governance for their administration, management and organisation (Clarke & Newman, 1997), the chapter focuses on main characteristics of activation service provision models (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; van Berkel & Borghi, 2008; Bredgaard & Larsen, 2007; van Berkel et al., 2011) trying to analyse different dynamics at stake which often risk being underexposed when referring to activation as a single lens or as a general trajectory of change (Newman, 2007).

Furthermore, the chapter draws particular attention to the level of frontline work in activation services, pointing out that frontline work practice and characteristics are shaping policies in their concretion and affecting their outcomes. As this dimension is at the heart of this work, the chapter presents different perspectives from which frontline practice in activation services can be looked at and analysed. Although the dimension of frontline work has been taken into account in the research literature on the implementation of activation policies (mainly with reference to Michael Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach), it has often been mainly framed as policy programme administration activity and discussed in relation to the issues of

discretion and bureaucratic control. Therefore, the chapter finally outlines current research perspectives and introduces the growing (and greatly needed) debate on the challenges of professionalisation processes in this field. In this regard, the chapter raises the question as to how professionalisation can contribute to activation work as a practice of citizenship that overcomes a strict active/passive divide and involves unemployed and benefit-claiming people as active agents and citizens who can make their voice heard (Johansson & Hvinden, 2013).

2.1 Going Beyond Formal Policy

Much of the comparative literature on activation policies has focused on the formal policy itself, i.e. substantial aspects regulated in national legislation (Brodkin, 2007, 2011; van Berkel, 2017), assuming that the impact of such policies is mainly determined by formal policy programmes. Van Berkel (2011) challenges the idea that the analysis of national legislation provides sufficient insight into the nature of activation policies and their impact on social citizenship.

> Changes in national legislation concerning the substantial characteristics of social policies do not give us a complete picture of how welfare state reforms affect core dimensions of social citizenship and individual autonomy. The treatment of the target groups of social policy programmes, the nature of the support and services—these and other aspects of social citizenship are not simply regulated in national programmes and subsequently implemented by administrative agencies. They are actively produced in increasingly complex governance and organisational contexts that involve a large variety of agencies and agents in policy making, policy delivery and service provision processes. (p. 195)

What is produced as policy on the ground is shaped by the ways in which policy is translated into practice. Thus, the analysis of activation policies also has to take into account the dimension of policy implementation or, as Brodkin (2007) points out , "the less glamorous but fundamental challenge lies in the seemingly mundane functions of administration" , even more "in the case

of those social policies in which lower-level discretion is often a necessary and intrinsic feature of provision" (p. 2).

But the implementation and administration of activation policies entails a variety of complex interrelated processes concerning the level of governance, i.e. the roles and responsibilities of actors and agencies involved in policy making and implementation, as well as the level of the organisation of service delivery and, within this context, the dimension of street-level practice. Research on activation policies comprises a lot of insightful work bringing together a social policy perspective on national and subnational programmes regulating substantial aspects of formal policies with insights from governance and public administration studies, and challenging thereby the idea of policy as a fixed and clear set of goals and strategies which implementation and administration simply need to follow. Rather, the debate refers to what implementation theorists Barrett and Fudge (1981) call the policy-action relationship, namely the processes of interaction, negotiation and decision making which translate and transform the governmental intention of stated policy into its actual responses and outcomes in practice. Opening up the black box of what comes after adopting formal policy has challenged the ideas of policy as arriving fully-formed from above and of its implementation as a neutral and mere technical process. Instead, the idea of policy as a dynamic and unfinished domain shaped by plurality of actors in different sites of a dispersed field of power (Newman, 2007) has been highlighted. With regard to activation policies, van Berkel et al. (2017) distinguish between social policy contexts referring to formal policy programmes, governance contexts concerning the structure of actors involved in policy making and implementation with their roles, responsibilities and interrelations, organisational contexts referring to street-level organisations and service delivery management and, last but not least, the occupational context that "refers to the professional training of frontline workers in activation, the role of professional associations in policy making and policy implementation, and the impact of how workers treat their clients and provide activation" (Caswell et al., 2017). With respect to the aspects of governance and organisation, different scholars have pointed out that New Public Management and new governance reforms have significantly influenced the ways in which activation programmes are governed and how their implementation is managed and organised (Clarke &

Newman, 1997; Weishaupt, 2010b). The impact of these reforms refers to the actors involved in policy making and delivery, to their roles, responsibilities and mutual relationships and to the ways their actions are steered and coordinated. In this sense, it is important to point out that new modes of governance and new management ideas are not neutral in terms of their impact on the nature and accessibility of the services offered as well as on the ways people are treated in these services and, thus, also on the consequences for the concretion of social citizenship (van Berkel, 2011).

2.2 Governance of What?

The concept of governance evokes a more pluralistic pattern than government focusing less on state institutions and more both on the connections between the state and supra- and subnational levels as well as on the processes and interactions between state and civil society. Furthermore, the concept has spread in connection with new theories of politics and of new public sector reforms (Mayntz, 2004; Benz & Dose, 2010; Bevir, 2010; Treib et al., 2007). Accordingly, in the context of welfare state research, the concept of governance is often used to depict both the shift from government to governance, i.e. towards less state-centred modes of welfare provision or/and to refer to a network mode of organising collective action (van Berkel & Borghi, 2008).

Daly (2003) distinguishes the embeddedness of the concept in different academic discourses, each of them offering a specific perspective on processes of welfare state reform. A first discourse refers to the state's capacities and competences in dealing with social issues and providing welfare, focussing on the different actors involved in the provision of public goods and services and on their interrelationships and on the implied questions of definition of the public good and of public responsibility. A second strand of discourse focuses specifically on the European Union, taking into account supranational politics and the increasing multilevel governance in European welfare states. The third discourse, finally, is about the governance of people or, as Clarke (2004) points out, "reflects an interest in governing as the practices of managing populations and their conduct" (p. 111). It relates to issues such as the social construction of target groups of different programmes, the definition of their problems and the nature of interventions and as such, in

short, to the governance of people on whom services are targeted (Daly, 2003). All these discourses are relevant and provide important perspectives for researching the governance of activation in relation to the issues of public responsibility and the nature of state intervention (see e.g. Gilbert, 2002), to international trends and supranational strategies (see e.g. Weishaupt, 2010a,), as well as on rescaling processes and local governance (see e.g. Sabatinelli, 2010) and on the main features of service provision models (van Berkel et al., 2011; Zimmermann et al., 2014; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016).

Anyway, the perspective provided by the third discourse strand on governance as managing people and their conduct shows that all these aspects and issues cannot be seen in a disconnected way and, to put it very simply, that the governance of activation always has to do with what happens to people in practice. As Berkel and Borghi (2008) point out,

> questions concerning the governance and management of agencies and institutions involved in the administration and implementation of activation policies are linked with questions concerning the governance and management of the people at whom the services provided by these agencies and institutions are targeted. (p. 333)

This perspective relates back to the general idea that the welfare state reforms over the last decades have affected at the same time and in an interrelated way both the dimensions of programmatic characteristics of social policies and welfare state arrangements and the dimension of governance underlying the administration, management and organisation of these policies and arrangements (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Relating to the distinction between formal and operational policy proposed by Carmel and Papadoupolos (2009) with formal policy referring to the "what" of policies and services, i.e. their programmatic characteristics, and operational policy to the "how" of policies, i.e. to issues regarding their organisation, administration and delivery, it can be pointed out that the "what" and the "how" are interrelated and that also the operational dimension of social policy is relevant for the process of policy making in a broader sense. This approach clearly shows that implications and impacts of activation policies can be captured only by going beyond formal policy and by analysing what is going on at the level of local

governance and street-level provision of activation services. Although this book clearly focuses on frontline work, it is important to understand also the contexts of frontline work and to explore the challenges deriving from these contextual circumstances (van Berkel et al., 2017) in a critical manner. Hence, before moving down to the central aspect of frontline work, the next paragraph focuses on the main characteristics of activation service provision models trying to unpack critically different dynamics which often risk being underexposed when referring to activation as a single lens or as a general trajectory of change without carving out its ambivalences and possible tensions (Newman, 2007).

2.3 Activation Service Provision Models

The programmatic of activation strategies is characterised by some main and interrelated features such as an individualised approach, an emphasis on employment and the element of contractualisation as one of its core principles. It is against this background that issues related to the governance of activation policies and the organisation of individualised service provision have gained in importance and, hence, increasingly attracted notice both by theoretical considerations as well as by empirical implementation research. Before giving a brief overview of the main characteristics discussed in the literature with respect to new modes of governance and service provision models, it is useful to underline that

> the trend towards individualized service provision is not a merely "technical" or "methodical" issue regarding the way in which services should be delivered. Instead, it is embedded in, and part of, processes aimed at reforming social policies and their governance, which, in their turn are taking place in order to cope with broader, economic, cultural, demographic and social developments. In other words, discussing individualised activation services unavoidably raises questions regarding the necessity, feasibility and desirability of the welfare state transformations of which they are an integral part. (van Berkel, 2007, p. 245)

This understanding, together with the conception of policy as a decentred and dynamic process (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Evans & Hardy, 2010), is the necessary basis of a heuristic framework which allows a grasp of both the larger picture of societal transformation underlying the issues of governance of activation policies and, eventually, also the political significance of frontline activation work. In this sense, the following paragraphs highlight the main features discussed in relation to new modes of governance and service provision models in the context of activation policies, trying to unpack different dynamics and possible tensions in a critical manner and to highlight different entry points for a deeper understanding of ambiguities and challenges which are eventually concentrated in the burning glass of frontline practice.

2.3.1 Rescaling processes

One central aspect of new welfare provision models has been described as "rescaling", a phenomenon that refers to processes of localisation or decentralisation of regulatory powers and responsibilities in the design and delivery of social policy programmes from the national to regional and local levels and as a consequence the emergence of new modes of institutional-territorial organisation and of multi-level governance (van Berkel & Borghi, 2008; Lobao et al., 2009; Kazepow, 2010; Künzel, 2012; Andreotti et al., 2012; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). With respect to activation policies, Greffe (2003) highlights several reasons for decentralisation, most of them relating to challenges that are seen as requiring processes of policy making and delivery in proximity to the contexts and actors involved, such as the multi-faceted nature of unemployment, the increasing volatility of the labour market in a globalised economy and hence the need for innovative solutions through local partnerships, the transformation from passive to active welfare states and the promotion of social inclusion in a broader sense. Sabatinelli (2010) discusses activation and rescaling processes as two interrelated phenomena in social policy development, both of them triggered by similar driving forces partly stemming from ongoing macro changes in all Western welfare states, but filtered and shaped by specific institutional and socio-economic characteristics of different national and local contexts. Sabatinelli discusses the emergence of activation policies in relation to different models of rescaling, identifying different

country clusters[12]. However, despite different framings and trajectories, all cases show a strong emphasis on the local level, which is, "in fact, undeniably of major relevance when analysing activation policies because its essence lies in in-kind services: counselling, (re)training, protected working experiences. In this sense we can say that the emphasis on activation has been a main driving force for the decentralisation of policy responsibilities, as activation requires the involvement of lower, sub-national territorial levels." (Sabatinelli, 2010, p. 102). Furthermore, the collaboration of different local actors becomes a crucial element in the implementation of activation policies, which hence require also the development of horizontal governance arrangements between local authorities and third-sector organisations and private providers of services. In this sense, the field of activation is a prime example for what has been described as the subsidiarisation of social policies (Kazepow, 2008, 2010) in both its directions, i.e. vertically as the territorial reorganisation of regulatory powers, and horizontally as the multiplication of actors involved in policy making and delivery. But the significance of rescaling and decentralisation processes goes beyond the one of a mere organisational principle of policy making and delivery and it must be contextualised within a wider larger picture of societal and political transformation. Borghi and van Berkel (2007) discuss key characteristics of the new modes of governance in activation in relation to the notion of publicness[13], pointing out that decentralisation

12 For different paths in relation to the decentralisation and centralisation of activation for social assistance recipients in Europe see e.g., also Minas et al., 2012.

13 They assume that "publicness depends much more on the properties characterizing the actions of a plurality of (public and private) agencies and on the qualities and the aims of their relationships than on the a priori supposed nature of the agencies themselves. This perspective, in which publicness has to do with the the process of treating a matter rather than with the actors involved, is rooted in a specific conception of the public sphere, the public good and of public social services." (Borghi and van Berkel, 2007, p. 358). Similarly, also Newman and Clarke (2009) discuss public services as a medium for publicness. Clarke and Newman argue that "public services can—under some conditions—act as a focus for the formation of public imagineries and collective identities, and help sustain solidaristic attachments.… This means that public services are not only public because of their material basis in public funding or being located in a public sector. They are both constituted by, and constitutive of, notions of publicness. They are constituted because of their association with a particular set of 'public' discourses and cultural resources; and they are constitutive through the ways in which publicness is constantly being remade through the practices of public service work and technologies of public governance. There is an important argument about

> can mean very different things dependent on the national institutional framework; but, in general the range of possible (intended and unintended) consequences, as far as issues of publicness are concerned, can vary from increased visibility (e.g. decision making processes are closer to the citizens), to a gradual weakening of the universalistic claim of publicness and an intensification of the territorial fragmentation of rights. (p. 358)

2.3.2 Marketisation and competition

The multiplication of actors in service delivery relates to a second main feature of activation service provision, namely marketisation and competition (Considine, 2001; van Berkel & Borghi, 2008). The trend of distinguishing between the role of service purchaser and service provider has been accompanied by the introduction of marketisation and competition in the provision of activation services (while measures of income support normally remain a public responsibility). Promoting competition is expected to have positive impacts on the efficiency and effectiveness of services, on their flexibility, responsiveness, quality and, last but not least, on their price (Fay, 1997; Sol & Westerveld, 2005; Bredgaard & Larsen, 2007, 2008). Bredgaard and Larsen (2007, 2008) analyse the implications of the contracting out of public employment services, challenging the domination of technical discourses on management reforms which tend to neglect consequences for policy content. Bredgaard and Larsen ask if quasi-markets[14] in employment policy do deliver on the promises of improved efficiency, improved quality and de-bureaucratisation, what implications the new public management-inspired contracting out of this kind of services have for political governance and regulation and, finally, what the impacts of contracting out on policy content are. Their

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the diminution or erasure of the publicness of public services resulting from the introduction of markets, contracts and a consumerist focus. It is often asserted that, without collective solidarities, it is impossible to have state-funded welfare delivered through public institutions. We want to turn this on its head, arguing that collective provision and public institutions can help constitute collective belongings through the relationships and identifications they foster." (p. 4).

14 The theory of quasi-markets highlights at least three ways so-called quasi-markets differ from conventional markets. In quasi-markets not all providers are privately owned or aim at maximising profits; demand in the market is often public and not private and the choice of provider is often delegated to a third party, the service purchaser (Le Grand and Bartlett , 1993).

findings disprove the great expectations that contracting out would lead to more innovative methods and to more responsive services. "Rather than developing new methods and innovating services, service providers fight to survive in the market, and are reluctant to take risks unless the outcome is considered certain." (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2008, p. 350). This means that, in the end, involvement of employers and networks remains weak and that contracting out is accompanied by a strong supply-side orientation and, thus, work-first approaches. Eventually, even if the relationship between services user and provider turns into a customer-business relationship, free user choice can hardly be applied and effects of "creaming and parking" are almost unavoidable within a framework of market economic logic (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2007, 2008). With regard to the implications for political governance and regulation, the contracting out of services, processes of market creation and the subsequent increasing needs for control and regulation profoundly change the governance of employment policy, but as Bredgaard and Larsen (2007) point out,

> it is evident that changing the public governance of employment policy from implementation based on public and bureaucratic management principles to implementation through market- and competition-based non-public agents is anything but a simple administrative exercise. Employment policy is a field where service provision will always be subject to political demands: demands that can be difficult to meet when relying on indirect, incentive-based management of non-public agents. Paradoxically, there are indications that such an approach results in attempts to manage non-public agents in a more traditional bureaucratic way through increasing direct public regulation. (p. 293)

Bredgaard and Larsen show what impact contracting out has on the substance of employment policy and why it might be even a useful strategy in deliberately promoting work-first approaches. As already pointed out, the ultimate focus of providers in a market framework is the quickest route to (re-) employment, which means that they invest mainly in the most promising target groups, that they have a limited focus on improving formal qualifications and that there is a higher risk of further "passivation" or increased "parking" of the weaker unemployed. However, the predominance of a technical-ration-

al discussion which hardly touches questions concerning substantial policy fails to grasp how public matters, and eventually people are treated (Borghi and van Berkel, 2007) and means (and even assures) that "(f)ar-reaching policy changes become politically invisible and de-politicised" (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2007, p. 288). In a similar way, Davies (2008) challenges the idea that either the private or the third sector has a consistently better record in the provision of employment services. As Davies shows, it is claimed that especially third sector organisations are not only more efficient and innovative, but that they bring additional benefits related to their advocacy role, their influence on policy development and their ability for democratic engagement and the strengthening of civil society. According to Davies, these different roles of the third sector do create tensions in relation to the contracting out and the provision of employment services and, in fact, he shows that in the UK the evidence for superior performance also of the third sector in employment service provision is rather thin (Davies, 2008)[15]. In line with former findings, Zimmermann et al. (2014) also put the aspect of marketisation into perspective. They develop a theoretical framework of regulating the marketisation of activation services and present the analysis of three empirical cases. Their findings show a link between the regulation of marketisation and the level of discretion for local actors. However, notwithstanding common marketisation trends, activation principles are only to a small extent translated into practice via the marketisation of service delivery. Local implementation continues to be more dependent on local discretion and local policy histories than on the marketisation of services. (Zimmermann et al., 2014).

Against this background, and especially concerning the main focus of this book, it's worth underlining, with Hasluck and Green (2007), that "there is little evidence that the nature of the provider of services … has a systematic impact on effectiveness. What does appear to be important is the quality, enthusiasm, motivation and commitment of the staff providing the service" (p. 145). Surprisingly, these latter aspects have for a long time been rather marginal in the debate about activation service delivery.

15 For a general overview and recommendations for the Italian case see also Sartori (2013).

2.3.3 Interagency cooperation and integration of services

A third main feature of activation service provision models related to interagency cooperation and integration of services targeted at unemployed people (van Berkel & Borghi, 2008; Lindsay & McQuaid, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2008; Champion & Bonoli, 2011; Minas, 2014; Qvist, 2016). As van Berkel and Borghi (2008) point out,

> cooperation between benefit and employment service agencies—especially in countries where employment services and benefit administration are, or used to be, delivered by separate agencies—is considered to be a logical consequence of the activation of income protection systems, as it fits with the aim to develop benefits into springboards towards labour market-participation, to prioritise work before income and to make benefit entitlements conditional upon participation in activation. (p. 337)

Lindsay and McQuaid (2008) highlight the increasing prominence of new forms of interagency cooperation in the development and delivery of activation strategies. These strategies are in line with the recommendations of the European Employment Strategy, which emphasises local partnerships and collaboration as a means of responsive activation services, arguing at the same time for a progressive demonopolisation of the realm once dominated by public employment services (Weishaupt, 2010a) and, more generally, with the increasing importance of the concept of (local) partnerships in the canon of public policy (Larner & Butler, 2005; Kazepow, 2010; Andreotti et al., 2012; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). As Lindsay and McQuaid point out, the notion of local partnerships encapsulates both forms of systemic coordination, i.e. multiagency governance based on institutionalised joint-working, and principal-agent relations, which may also include tendering models for the contracting out of services. The expected benefits of effective interagency cooperation and local partnerships are summed up in six key benefits. The first one, local flexibility and responsiveness, suggests that—given the complexity and the local sensitivity of labour market and social exclusion processes—multi-agency approaches grounded in the context of local labour markets can facilitate the tailoring of interventions to specific local circumstances. The second one, the sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources, emphasises

the bringing together of different stakeholders with their different forms of knowledge, expertise and resources as a means of developing targeted solutions for disadvantaged areas or groups. As a third key benefit, synergies available form partnership approaches and cooperation should improve the overall efficiency, not least due to better communication, smoother service interaction and the avoidance of gratuitous duplications. Another key benefit is seen in the developing of joint services. Strategic partnerships are expected to achieve coherent and integrated approaches and, thus, service environments. The collaboration between agencies should result in better-aligned service offers and convenient "one-stop-shops" for service users. Furthermore, multi-agency partnerships and collaborations are expected to build community capacity. The local collaboration between public agencies and community organisations should engender a sense of shared ownership and offer new opportunities to practical impacts on the policy agenda. Last but not least, local partnerships and collaborations are expected to provide better legitimisation and stakeholders more likely to "buy in" and to commit themselves to making interventions work. But, as Lindsay and McQuaid also point out, there are possible limits to the extent to which models of interagency cooperation on activation can deliver these benefits. Effective interagency cooperation can be undermined by the rigidity of institutional and policy structures on the one hand, on the other hand, community organisations can also find their independence undermined and hence endangered in their very potential. Finally, where multiagency solutions are based on contracting out, the possible benefits might be undermined also by problems of transactions costs and the subordination of quality to financial concerns. Lindsay and McQuaid (2008) show that

> effective inter-agency cooperation in the governance and delivery of activation remains most likely within partnerships where strong PES organisations retain a key role in the management and (if appropriate) delivery of services, but are also empowered to share resources and decision-making authority with other stakeholders. (p. 364)

Champion and Bonoli (2011) underline that within the reorientation of welfare states towards activation, the internal fragmentation of social security

systems has emerged as a key policy problem. Coordination initiatives, understood as any reforms of the administration and delivery of benefits and services aimed at tackling this fragmentation, may be more or less far-reaching, ranging from collaboration guidelines or partnership work without reorganisation of the system over the introduction of "one-stop-shop" models, to the outright merger of agencies. Champion and Bonoli analyse coordination initiatives in different countries in reference to both their intensity and inclusiveness and try to explain them as dependent phenomenon by applying different approaches from political science theory. Their purpose is to enhance an explanatory perspective on the more hidden and obscure side of policy reforms, namely the side of operational policy which is likely to go unnoticed for a majority of voters but which cannot, as already pointed out, be disentangled from substantive changes in welfare policies. Genova (2008) also highlights that the redefinition of welfare policies concerns not only their formal aims and objectives, but also their service organisation structure. Within the general tendency to break down barriers between different areas of welfare policy all EU welfare systems have increasingly been focused on the integration between labour market and social assistance policies and, thus, also the integration of the correspondent services as a main issue in activation policies. The emphasis on linking labour market and social assistance policies has been framed by three main aspects: firstly by the strong focus on activation policies as part of the dominant political outlook, secondly by the prominent role of activation policies in the EU welfare model and, last but not least, by the rescaling of regulative authorities in activation policies (Genova, 2008). In this sense, also the feature of interagency cooperation and service integration is not just a question of better or more efficient organisation of services but it also stands for certain policy goals and developments which have to be increasingly managed at local level. In fact, as Minas (2014) critically notes based on a comparative analysis of integrated service models, "integrated service provision entails the risk of introducing stricter work conditionality for broad and vulnerable groups without fulfilling the promises of seamless services" (p. S40).

2.3.4 Management ideas matter

These main features of activation services and the processes related to the governance of activation in general, such as rescaling, marketisation, contracting out, interagency cooperation, are not mere organisational aspects, but they are linked to and determine also the content, the substantial dimension of what activation policies turn out to be and to mean in practice. In this sense, issues and ideas about governance, administration and management have to be better taken into account in order to grasp their impact in shaping policies and translating them into practice, even more as they tend to be more unnoticed and hidden on the operational side and in apparently "aseptic" management talk (Weishaupt, 2010b; Klenk & Pavolini, 2015; Klenk, 2018). Weishaupt (2010b) points out that the common turn to activation has generated a large body of literature assessing substantial aspects of national instruments and programmes, while much less is known about the governance of activation policy even if administration and implementation of welfare policies contribute to the very nature of welfare states, affect the relationship between citizens and the state and determine the effectiveness of policy delivery. This is even more surprising in the case of activation policies with their emphasis on programmes and services aimed at promoting employability and labour market participation and at playing a key role in reducing welfare dependency and making welfare states more activating. Weishaupt argues that governance of public employment services, government's most important arms in delivering activation policies, has been fundamentally changed by the spread of New Public Management ideas. This silent revolution through the discovery and spread of NPM ideas first emerged in the UK and Sweden and spread subsequently through international organisations such as the OECD and the EU and internalised by critical epistemic communities has lead to the "consolidation of a common template, defining what a modern PES ought to look like" (Weishaupt, 2010b, p. 480), which has been adopted by different countries regardless of their governments' party composition or welfare regime type. As Weishaupt (2010b) points out, core trajectories include "a common focus on performance, quality and case management as well as contestability in service delivery and the reinforcement of the *collaboration* between, if not *merger* of, agencies proving care PES functions"

(p. 480). However, these convergent trajectories with respect to the governance of PES remain contingent on historical legacies and cultural predispositions as well as on political actors' interpretations of problems and constitutional limitations. Anyway, contributions to the role of ideas in welfare administration and its reform highlight the more silent, but very important, role of prevailing management ideas and their diffusion by critical epistemic communities to keep activation regimes in flux and to spur the convergence at the level of ideas, while modes of implementation remain contingent and vary between and within welfare states (Klenk, 2018).

2.3.5 Different dynamics at stake

Recognising that the operational side of policy cannot be completely separated from the substantial dimension of policy content is an important prerequisite for understanding that policy making also has to do with governance and goes on during processes of implementation and delivery. But speaking about governance of activation in a general way and pointing out its main features might risk conflating in a few general concepts very different dynamics and losing sight of the multiple tensions and the changing configurations in terms of power and authority both between institutions and between individuals and institutions. As Newman (2007) states,

> activation forms a condensate through which contemporary governance trends can be analysed, and the literature has highlighted the importance of processes of decentralisation, individualisation, personalisation, contractualisation, marketisation, together with the emergence of network based and collaborative forms of governance. However, the problem of viewing activation as a condensate—a single lens through which different trends and tendencies can be brought into view—is that this may collapse important differences in the forms of power and authority that are deployed and mask potential tensions arising from their dynamic interaction in specific sites. (p. 364)

Newman critically asks how far general concepts can be applied to institutional change as well as to changing relationships between service organisations and their clients and points out that the collapse of questions of governance and policy in apparently similar concepts may be suggestive in describ-

ing general trends, but counterproductive in grasping the different dynamics at stake in the interaction between policy and governance. In this sense, she unpacks the central concepts of privatisation, individualisation and contractualisation as "rather slippery concepts" (p. 365) usually applied both to the content of policy and the ways of its implementation. With regard to privatisation, Newman points out that the debate on privatisation is represented by the state versus market distinction, providing one certain way of understanding the concept, namely the shift towards the privatisation of public goods and services, but obscuring the very different meanings of the private. The state versus market representation of public and private not only tends to omit gender and familial relationships, as feminist critiques have shown (Daly, 2000; Lewis, 1992, 2002; Sainsbury, 1994, 1996, 1999), but by referring to the private as markets, governed by the principle of demand and supply and coordinated by impersonal exchanges, it obscures the meaning of the private as the private realms of family, household and community. Furthermore, it neglects the meaning of the private as the personal, as sense of identity and personal values and relationships. Unpacking the concept of privatisation in relation to the different meanings of private, Newman (2007) spells out that privatisation is not only about the privatisation of service delivery, but that privatisation as privatisation of social risks might come along with processes of informalisation and familialisation of welfare as well as with new forms of governmental power, "in which the personal becomes both an object (of new strategies) and a resource (to be mobilised in the process of constituting new forms of self-governing welfare subjects)" (p. 366). Similarly, the personal tends to be conflated with the concept of individualisation, the latter referring to strategies and practices of service delivery based on the idea that services need to be flexible, tailor-made, responsive to individual circumstances. But as Newman points out, the concept of individualisation as ideal of service delivery differs in subtle ways from personalisation as a governmental strategy. In the context of personalisation as a governmental strategy, "activation measures can be understood as opening up more of the person to governmental power, requiring them to collaborate in the development of new subjective orientations to the worlds of work and welfare" (p. 366). Keeping apart individualisation as ideal for service delivery and personalisation as a governmental strategy allows a grasp of the different dynamics of what has

been labelled as the "making it personal" (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007) and their implications beyond the mere question of how activation services should be delivered. However, introducing the Foucauldian concept of governmentality[16] as "conduct of the conduct" (Foucault, 1991), Newman (2007) also refers to the interrelatedness and the mutual reinforcement of individualised service delivery and personalisation as governmental strategy in practice. In this sense, the individual relationship between client and case worker allows for new forms of governmentality "associated with the installation of new subject positions and normative orientations" (p. 366). With regard to the concept of contractualisation, Newman's argumentation concerns the conflation of different forms of contracts, institutional contracts between purchasers and providers and individualised contracts between services and citizens, as well as the different characters of administrative versus social contracts in relation to their focus on the personal. According to Newman, the social contract of activation

> invokes new forms of governmentality that are based to the inculcation of new forms of governable subject, subjects in which the person—his or her "inner will"—becomes a resource enabling the transformation of welfare states through the transformation of obligations into commitments. (p. 367)

This critical approach not only shows the difficulties of condensing apparently similar concepts of contractualisation cutting across strategies of both institutional and personal governance, but it also uncovers the slipperiness of many of the ideas condensed in the activation debate, such as the empowerment of active citizens and their greater involvement in the realisation of policies and services. From a governmentality perspective, these strategies might be seen as new disciplinary logics of rule opening up more of the person to governmental power, "for example in the process of 'responsibilising' citizens, encouraging them to be 'active' (but only in certain ways), and engaging them in partnership with the state in finding solutions to the problems of welfare after the welfare state" (Newman, 2007, pp. 367f).

16 The notion of governmentality derives from Foucault's work, which points out the attempts to shape human behaviour and the governance of the self as techniques of the art of government in a broad and subtle sense (see e.g. Dean, 1999). A governmentality approach on frontline work in activation services is discussed more elaborately later on (2.4.2).

This critical perspective challenges the concept of activation as a single lens to describe one precise trajectory of change and explores the different dynamics at stake in the governance of activation. It thus offers a critical approach to looking at activation in practice and to asking how these different dynamics interact differently in different situations and in relation to different target groups. A more differentiated view like this on how the main features of activation can be applied to the governance of both institutions and persons and on the underlying configurations of power and authority is essential for understanding frontline practice in activation services, as the very moment when the personal is encountered by these different dynamics at stake.

2.4 Frontline Work Matters

While the former paragraphs have dealt with issues of governance and key characteristics of activation service provision models in general, this section will address more specifically the aspect of frontline work in activation services. In this context, the aspect of frontline is considered as going beyond a mere organisational matter. Frontline workers have also to be seen as agents determining the enactment of policies and, as such, as being part of the policy making community. Their job is the implementation of policy and its translation into practices. At the same time, frontline workers also dispose of discretional spaces in order to "get the job done" and hence at least of some margins of autonomy. Additionally, they probably also have their own attitudes and opinions in respect of policy goals (maybe determined by their very personal background of biography, personality and feelings, too), their own understandings and interpretations of what they are doing and of which the most important or meaningful aspects of their work are. Last but not least, it has to be taken into account that they are the interface between the policy and its target groups, often representing the only person-to-person contact the majority of service users have with employment and/or welfare services. This means that they are exposed to the real frontline, where activation policies with their different dynamics encounter the personal and meet with people's needs, expectations and ideas. Thus, the enactment of activation policies and their translation into practice occurs through this encounter between frontline workers and service users. As Meyers et al. (1998) put it, "social policies

as enacted reflect the actions (and strategic nonactions) of implementing agents that are likely to produce (or fail to produce) behavioral and other outcomes consistent with the objectives of policy-making principals" (pp. 2f).

This perspective is even more important, as one of the core features of the provision of activation services is the phenomenon of individualisation.[17] As pointed out, in very general terms individualisation in service provision means that services should be adjusted to individual circumstances to increase their effectiveness, that "one-size-fits-all" approaches should be replaced by individualised or tailor-made ways of service provision. Van Berkel and Valkenburg (2007) discuss the phenomenon of individualisation against the background of the turn towards "active" welfare states and new forms of governance. They point out different motives for and legitimations of individualisation and show that this tendency of "making it personal" is far from clear and unambiguous.

First, the individualisation of service provisions is intended to cope with the heterogeneity of target groups in order to meet the diversity of needs and circumstances services are supposed to deal with and, thus, to produce effectiveness and efficiency gains. Individualising activation services should refer people only to programmes which fit their situation and consequently raise their motivation. But these expectations are not free from possible contradictions, as

> the actors involved—policy makers, programme providers, case managers, clients—may have different opinions on what effectiveness means, for example. In most cases, effectiveness is defined in terms of labour market entry; which does not necessarily have to coincide with the ambitions and wishes of the clients. But even when it does, effectiveness can mean different things. Does it refer to sustainable employment? Does it refer to labour market inclusion in jobs that match the qualifications, skills, ambitions and wishes of the individual? Does it refer to placing people in a job as quickly as possible, irrespective of the sustainability or quality of the job? (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007, p. 12)

17 As the tour d'horizon on different notions and regimes of activation in Chapter 1 has shown, a common feature consists precisely of the emphasis on individualised activation services as a core element of effective active labour market policies.

Another expectation is that the more individualised provision of activation services should strengthen citizens' individual responsibility, which figures considerably both in active welfare state discourses and in discourses on new forms of governance. In the active welfare state discourse, individual responsibility is mainly referred to in order to underline

> that it is first and foremost the unemployed individual who is responsible for preventing unemployment and realising self-sufficiency through labour market participation. Individualisation against this background means that the responsibilities, obligations and entitlements of the unemployed person are determined on an individual basis. Subsequently, the person's behaviour is supervised on a individual basis in order to monitor compliance; if applicable, the individual may be sanctioned or rewarded. (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007, p. 12)

In the discourse on new forms of governance, the notion of individual responsibility might have a rather different meaning as it is embedded in a debate which emphasises the competences of services users to determine their needs and to participate in the development of interventions able to meet them. In this debate, individual responsibility relates to the choice of services users - to the option of voice in a more participatory approach or at least to the option of exit in a more consumerist perspective—in order to increase the responsiveness of services, to promote the competition between providers and to put the "customer" in charge in the service provision process (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007).

Last but not least, as it has already been discussed in Chapter 1, the activation turn has also been a response to increasing pressures on welfare states and

> (t)he process of individualization mirrors the attempt to modernize the welfare state in the midst of growing ideological and financial constraints, creating flexible services in which political recognition of late modern societies' heterogeneity and differentiation converge with the economic imperative of efficiency. (Maron, 2014, p. 88)

In this sense, reducing welfare state expenditure is also a motive which might be related to a more individualised provision of services. Increased effectiveness and efficiency are also expected to produce favourable fiscal effects, not least by a more targeted application of resources and the promotion of welfare independence. But the strong focus on individualised service provision might also

> strengthen the gatekeeper function of social security systems, increase selectivity and promote fraud prevention as it generally increases the opportunities for behaviour surveillance, and introduces new ways of defining and distinguishing "deserving" from "non-deserving" clients. (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007, p. 13)

These remarks reveal that within the shift towards activation with its strong focus on individualisation, the dimension of service provision and, thus, frontline work have gained in importance. At the same time, it turns out that the notion of individualisation is by far not a clear and unambiguous phenomenon. On the contrary, it enfolds a variety of different and even contradictory dynamics which must be unravelled in order to understand the role of services in general and of frontline workers in particular, as well as the tensions and contradictions they have to face in their daily practice. As has already been argued, implementation processes are crucial in shaping the nature and content of policy delivery, especially in the domain of human services. As Hasenfeld (1983) points out in his seminal work, implementation in human services is further complicated as policy principles also depend on the frontline staff as well as on clients who are both the target and the final agents in the policy implementation chain. In this sense, policy outcomes are lastly jointly produced through transactions between frontline workers of services and their clients. Understandably, activation services with their more or less explicit aim of influencing the conduct of their target groups (van Berkel, 2010) can never be fully standardised but they need even more this face-to-face encounter between frontline workers and clients as well as conditions which allow this joint production of "activation outcomes". In this sense, "activation work" (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012) on the frontline of services is an integral part and a crucial aspect of activation strategies and

caseworkers play an increasingly important role in shaping the policy outcomes of the welfare state.

Different scholars have addressed the impact and consequences the shift towards activation has had not only for service users but also for service staff involved in delivering and providing activation services, suggesting a paradigmatic shift also in the way frontline work has to be approached and carried out in practice. Lurie (2001) analysed the changing functions of frontline staff in the context of the implementation of the TANF programme in the United States as shifting from impersonal clerical functions related to determining eligibility and benefits to the engagement in more personalized intervention strategies addressing the lives, behaviours, and financial problems of clients. Meyers et al. (1998) point out that the shift from income protection to activation implied also a shift in the social technologies on which the interactions between frontline workers and clients are founded.[18] Whereas income protection programmes required "people sustaining" activities primarily designed to maintain clients' well-being, activation strategies require "people changing technologies" designed to change the personal attributes, motivations and behaviours of clients. (Meyers et al., 1998). This shift in the role and in the prominence of frontline work in the context of activation strategies has gained in attention in the different research lines on activation. Maron (2014) distinguishes between a more structural-organisational and a more poststructural approach to the governance of activation. The first type engages with the governance of activation primarily from the perspectives of political economy as well as of institutional and organizational scholarship. In this context, frontline work is framed mainly within an organisational approach tending to disregard the agency of micro-level participants and the challenges of practice. A more critical research line is rooted in the poststructural

18 Their study analysed the implementation of Work Pays policies in local welfare agencies in California, focussing in particular on the face-to-face transactions between welfare workers and their clients. Work Pays was designed to promote work over welfare and self-sufficiency over welfare dependence, as was stated by the California Department of Social Services in a communication to frontline staff: "These changes are complicated, and can make your job more difficult. Fortunately, one aspect of the program has become easier to understand: *it always pays to work*... It's an important message, and it's one we hope you will help us deliver. You are a vital link to the AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children, U. N.) population and we can't hope to reach recipients without your support" (as cited in Meyers et al., 1998, p. 6).

tradition of Foucault drawing on a governmentality approach to activation in order to investigate micro-level reproductions of subjectivities in activation regimes. The challenge might be, however, to combine these different approaches and to look at frontline work from different perspectives in order to debunk what is going on in practice. Frontline work has to be contextualised within policy strategies and institutional and organisational contexts with their different dynamics of governance (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; van Berkel et al., 2017). In this sense, frontline work is part of policy delivery but it has to be conceived also as an active part of policy making, which means that the enactment of activation policies depends also on what frontline workers are doing and thinking and on how they move in ambiguous domains. The question as to what frontline workers are doing necessarily raises issues concerning discretion and autonomy. How much discretion do and should frontline workers have, how much discretion and autonomy is needed to get the job done in practice? And how are frontline workers seen in the policy chain? As reluctant partners whose cooperation is uncertain and difficult to achieve (Stoker, 1991) and who have, thus, to be strictly aligned and controlled in the administrative apparatus, or as reflexive practitioners who need to have discretion and professional autonomy in order to best serve the service users? What use of discretion and autonomy do frontline workers make against the background of different "welfare cultures" understood as knowledge, ideas and values which surround and inform and either justify or oppose welfare state interventions (Pfau-Effinger, 2005) as well as on the basis of their very own opinions? Acknowledging the agency and the meaning making of frontliners as contextualised actors means also understanding which kinds of relationship with their clients they prefer over others, which solutions they favour among different possibilities and maybe also how they engage in "defining 'privileged subjects' that they claim deserve the benefits of organized social welfare, counterposed to who do not" (Padamsee & Adams, 2002, pp. 190f). These different aspects of frontline work can be highlighted by different theoretical approaches. The following paragraphs focus on different theoretical perspectives in order to understand the different aspects of frontline work in activation services and to grasp the challenges frontliners have to face in practice. Although frontline work has increasingly been taken into account in research on activation in practice, questions regarding

(professional) challenges in this field have often remained rather marginal. This might be due also to the fact that there is no consensus as to whether activation work should be understood and designed as a more administrative or a more professional activity even though social welfare (in different fields) is increasingly linked to the activation paradigm and although research findings suggest that a professionalisation in this field might be desirable also for the general effectiveness of activation services (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012).

2.4.1 The use of discretion: Frontline work as street-level bureaucracy

The most prominent approach of looking at frontline work is doubtlessly Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach. Bringing together the perspective of individual behaviour in bureaucratic organisations with a policy implementation perspective, Lipsky's seminal work, first published in 1980, deals with the dilemmas of the individual in the paradoxical reality on the frontline of public services. The central claim of Lipsky's work is that the exercise of discretion is a critical dimension for public workers who regularly and directly interact with people in the course of their jobs. At the same time, these jobs are hard to be performed according to high standards of decision making processes because of structures of authority, sets of rules and the lack of resources necessary to respond properly to the individual "case", such as time and information. Thus, street-level bureaucrats have to manage their difficult jobs by developing routines of practice and by constructing and categorising (which often means also psychologically simplifying) their clientele and environment in ways that also influence the outcomes of their jobs and efforts. Lipsky argues that the work of different and apparently unrelated frontline workers bears structural resemblence as all of them embody the same essential paradox, namely to be highly scripted in order to achieve policy goals on the one hand, and to require, on the other one, constant improvisation and responsiveness. This paradox crops up daily in the tension between treating all citizens alike in their claims on government and being responsive and appropriate to the individual "case" at the same time and, eventually, in the often-perceived double-faced nature of these jobs. As Lipsky (1980/2010) points out, the term of street-level bureaucracy itself hints at this fundamen-

tal paradox: "'Bureaucracy' implies a set of rules and structures of authority; 'street-level' implies a distance from the center where authority presumably resides" (p. xii). But Lipsky's work goes beyond treating the problem of discretion as a mere organisational issue in public services. The important contribution of Lipsky's approach is that he highlights how the use of discretion by street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, the devices and strategies they apply in order to cope with work pressures and uncertainties and the decisions they eventually make effectively become the public policies they have to carry out in practice. In this sense, Lipsky's approach underpins the argument that understanding the impact of policies requires looking at what is going on in practice, or as Lipsky (1980/2010) puts it,

> public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators. These decision-making arenas are important, of course, but they do not represent the complete picture. To the mix of places where policies are made, one must add the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers. Further … policy conflict is not only expressed as the contention of interest groups, as we have come to expect. It is also located in the struggles between individual workers and citizens who challenge or submit to client-processing. (p. xiii)

Lipsky's approach offers a highly articulated and illuminating insight into the dilemmas street-level-bureaucrats encounter. Lipsky analyses working conditions and the problem of goals and performance measurement of street-level bureaucrats, their relations with clients in the tension between human interaction and bureaucratic systems and their critical role also for the rationing of services. But as already pointed out, Lipsky discusses these issues with a strong concern for the role of street-level bureaucrats in the final shaping of policy at its encounter with the personal and the impacts of public services to people's lives and opportunities and, eventually, to the dimension of citizenship itself. As Lipsky (1980/2010) argues,

> street-level bureaucrats have considerable impact on peoples' lives. This impact may be of several kinds. They socialise citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community. They determine the

> eligibility of citizens for government benefits and sanctions. They oversee the treatment (the service) citizens receive in those programs. Thus, in a sense, street-level bureaucrats implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state. In short, they hold a key dimension of citizenship. (p. 4)

This understanding underpins also Lipsky's analysis of the difficulties in the interaction with clients, which is not only determined by the balancing act between efforts in the personal interaction on the one hand, which imply responsiveness, on-the-spot decision making focused on the individual situation, but also managing the human encounter and the reactions of citizens, and the requirements of bureaucratic behaviour on the other. The difficulties in the interactions with clients have to be seen also in the light of the fact that street-level bureaucrats essentially act as agents of social control. As Lipsky points out, public services often play an important role in softening the impact of the economic system on those who are not its primary beneficiaries and in inducing service users to accept the neglect of primary economic and social institutions. In fact, regarding programmes of public support to employment e.g., Lipsky (1980/2010) states, "that they are designed and implemented to convey the message that welfare status is to be avoided and that work, however poorly rewarded, is preferable to public assistance" (p. 11).[19] In this sense, in many public services street-level bureaucrats embody the very essential ambivalence in many forms of state intervention and, as such, they are also at the centre (and often target) of public controversies. It is in this field of tension that street-level bureaucrats have to interact daily at services' frontlines.

As Lipsky points out, street-level bureaucrats make policy in two related respects. First, they exercise decisional discretion in interaction with citizens. Then, taken in concert, their individual actions amount to agency behaviour. However, the function of street-level bureaucrats as policy makers is built on two interrelated facets of their role, their degrees of discretion and their relative autonomy from organisational authority. According to Lipsky, it is one common trait of street-level bureaucrats that they exercise considerable

19 Written at the beginning of the 80s in the US, with the activation turn this idea has increasingly become prominent also in the context of European welfare states.

discretion. Of course, this is not to say that street-level bureaucrats are unrestrained by rules, regulations and directives from above. On the contrary, major dimensions of public policy, such as nature of services, categories of eligibility and levels of benefits, are shaped by policy elites and political and administrative officials. However, Lipsky's argument is that beneath laws, rules and regulations, street-level workers can and have to exercise discretion because certain characteristics of street-level bureaucracy jobs make it rather impossible to completely reduce discretion. Street-level bureaucrats often work in complex situations that are too complicated to be reduced to programmatic formats and often require responses to the human dimensions of situations. But the necessity of discretion does not only have to do with the nature of the tasks themselves. As Lipsky points out, a certain degree of discretion might be also needed to promote workers' self-regard and to make clients believe that workers hold the key to their well-being. In this sense, the maintenance of discretion contributes also to the legitimacy of public policies and services, both from the workers' and in the clients' perspective. From a policy implementation perspective, discretion in frontline work is needed to even allow the concretion of policy strategies in the moment of their encounter with the "real world", to make them work in practice. Herein also lies the reason that the handling of discretion in street-level organisations cannot but be ambivalent. Lipsky shows how organisations seek to control frontliners through various forms of bureaucratic control but how they have, at the same time, to leave discretional spaces, even tacitly accepting possible distortions between official policy strategies and real solutions. This is not only due to the impossibility of total control over street-level bureaucrats, but rather to the awareness that the implementation of policies needs discretional spaces for finding "real-world solutions to getting the job done" (Evans & Hardy, 2010, p. 108).[20]

20 Evans and Hardy (2010) discuss different ideas on how practitioners should use their discretion to make policies work in practice. Some ideas underline the importance of understanding the "spirit" of policies and the need of a realistic political sense of practitioners to distinguish between core policy goals and less important or more flexible aspects of their implementation (see, e.g. Sabatier, 1993). An idea which is important from a professional point of view emphasises the importance of professional ethics to guide those involved in "politics on the frontline". According to this idea professionals do not stand outside the policies, but nonetheless should be free to make decisions oriented by their own professional ethics. In this sense, policies should not be realised through the strict adherence to rigid procedures, but their

Such an understanding of discretion offers a highly relevant perspective for looking at activation policies with their emphasis on tailor-made services and individualisation. As Lorenz (2010) points out, social policies do not work automatically but their internal ambiguities allow (and need) considerable discretion in their implementation. Thus, it is increasingly important to focus on the relationship between policy development and practices of implementation in order to critically analyse the role that discretionary agents, such as frontliners, assume within political strategies, and this all the more so as the shift towards activation—as Meyers et al. (1998) suggest—makes frontline work less administrative and more focused on "people changing" rather than administrative people-processing social technologies. In fact, the issue of discretion has emerged as a key issue in research on the reorganisation of public welfare provision and particularly in the context of activation policies and services. But as Jewell (2007) highlights in his comparative study, discretion is not an all-or-nothing issue and the discretion on the frontline of activation services depends on the approach to activation and on diversities in activation programmes. Generally speaking, it can be assumed that discretion increases when "individualized, tailor-made and deregulated rather than uniform, standardized and fully regulated activation processes are pursued" (van Berkel, 2011, pp. 196f) and in this sense, the notion of discretion and its approach in the tradition of Lipsky is a valid reference point for a deeper understanding of activation in practice.

Another important aspect in Lipsky's work is his focus on the relations between street-level bureaucrats and their clients. Clients in street-level bureaucracies are usually non voluntary, either because street-level bureaucracies provide essential services which cannot be obtained elsewhere or, even if there is no public monopoly, public services are nevertheless the only services available to the poor. The fact that street-level bureaucracies have mostly non-voluntary clients means that they are less dependent on or even indifferent to the loss of clients or client dissatisfaction. Sometimes, street-level bureaucracies might even be rewarded for reducing the number of clients and

transformation into practice should be mediated by an ethically-oriented professionalism. Such a perspective shows the difference between a defensive practice that denies any possibility of discretion and a professional practice which claims areas of discretion in order to influence the implementation of policies on the basis of its professional mandate and values.

for being severe gatekeepers. Of course, the fact that often the majority of clients are non-voluntary has significant implications not only for street-level bureaucracies as a whole but also for the relations and interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients. If clients cannot avoid or withdraw from the encounter with frontliners in public services, this has an impact on the nature of interaction and the costs the non-voluntary person will sustain in the interaction become much higher. This aspect is an important element distinguishing the relationship between frontliners and users in activation services, designed, after all, to make "an offer you can't refuse", as Lødemel and Tricky (2001) aptly put as title of their contribution.

However, depicting the relation between frontliners and clients in street-level bureaucracies as a neat black-and-white issue with the powerful part on the one side and the involuntary, controlled and disciplined part on the other means oversimplifying its more complex nature. It is important to underline the asymmetric essence of the relationship and frontliners' function of control and disciplinary power. At the same time, it is important to recognize that street-level bureaucrats themselves are not free from constraints and different forms of control. They are usually pressed with heavy case loads and the demand for quick decision making in situations involving little time and information. Furthermore, they are guided by bureaucratic (and professional) standards of fairness but also by social norms of proper behaviour towards other people and by the recognition that power should be accompanied by responsibility, particularly when clients are identified as vulnerable or in need. This is not to say that street-level bureaucrats are immune to abusing their positions, but it underlines that street-level work has to be understood as the mobilisation of control in combination with constraints against excessive manifestations of power, a combination which overall is of crucial importance for the public legitimacy of street-level bureaucracies. Last but not least, it should be highlighted that street-level bureaucrats are also guided by their own ideals and and their commitment to serving the community and people in need, as Lipsky himself argues. In this sense, successful intervention, expressions of gratitude and changes in behaviour in the desired directions are very often meaningful elements to street-level bureaucrats, even though such developments are not always (only) attributable

to their work, which remains constrained by the intrinsic and extrinsic limits of the jobs they are doing.

Against this background, a very important aspect for grasping the nature of street-level practice relates to the social construction of clients. People come to street-level bureaucracies as unique individuals living in different circumstances and situations and having different personalities, experiences, needs and expectations. However,

> in their encounters with bureaucracies they are transformed into clients, identifiably located in a very small number of categories, treated as if, and treating themselves as if, they fit standardized definitions of units consigned to specific bureaucratic slots. The processing of *people* into *clients*, assigning them to categories for treatment by bureaucrats, and treating them in terms of those categories, is a social process. (Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. 59)

There might be, however, little agreement on the picture of "reality" provided by such constructions, as street-level bureaucrats and clients are

> intrinsically in conflict over objectives and the relationship is drastically unequal. What street-level bureaucrats think they do may have little connection with what clients think is going on. Clients tend to experience their needs as individual problems and their demands as individual expressions of expectations and grievances. They often expect treatment appropriate to them as individuals, and are in large measure encouraged in this expectation by public institutions and society in general. On the other hand, street-level bureaucrats experience client problems as calls for categories of action: individual client demands are perceived as components of aggregates. Expectations of proper treatment are framed in terms of satisfactory solutions for the optimal processing of the totality of the work rather than in terms of the best solutions for the individual cases. (p. 60)

Thus, the construction of clients has to be seen as part of the strategies by which street-level bureaucrats seek control over the process of service provision. In this sense the different dimensions of control in street-level bureaucracies and the ways it is exercised determine the ways clients are "construct-

ed" and "seen" and vice versa. Street-level bureaucrats can exercise control through the distribution of benefits and sanctions and the strategies and manoeuvres adopted for their allocation can be seen as being part of constructing client profiles. Furthermore, street-level bureaucrats also structure the context of the interaction with clients by determining when, how often, and under which circumstances interaction takes place and they teach the client role by telling clients what is expected from them and what they can expect if they behave properly. As the encounter between street-level bureaucrats and clients is the encounter with authority but in the shape of human interaction, it may also have psychological implications. In this sense, the way citizens are treated by street-level bureaucrats as symbols of authority may also impact on their view of themselves.

In a nutshell, Lipsky (1980/2010) shows that delivering street-level policy through bureaucracy means embracing a contradiction.

> On the one hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring and responsibility. On the other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resource limitations and constraints, making care and responsibility conditional. (p. 71)

The need to embrace this contradiction in person is the main feature of frontline work in street-level bureaucracies and it creates a field of tension wherein street-level bureaucrats have to find their role and a way to do their job. Lipsky describes how street-level bureaucrats are, on the one hand, expected to be advocates and to use their knowledge, skills and position in the best interest of their clients, while, on the other, they have to work under the alienating conditions of bureaucracy.

But this contradiction does not only have to be seen as inevitable; to the contrary, Lipsky's point is that exactly this contradiction and the discretion street-level bureaucrats must have in their jobs are necessary ingredients for the implementation of policy goals under circumstances of limited resources. Discretion in frontline work exactly arises from the need to turn policy goals into practice, to decide how to use the limited resources to reach those goals and, last but not least, to bring policy to its target groups through

personal encounter and human interaction (and thus to give a human face to authority and bureaucracy). Lispky developed his approach during the 1970s in the context of urban politics in North America and his approach reflects both his disciplinary perspective and his fields of interest. However, during the past few years there has been renewed interest in Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy perspective (Evans, 2010; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018) and this has to be seen against the background of paradigmatic shifts in conceptualising state intervention and in the context of policies which highlight multi-level governance and individualisation in service provision and, hence, need higher discretion on lower levels.

However, the notion of discretion is to some extent discussed differently in debates on policy implementation (Lipsky, 1993) and in debates on professional practice (Evans & Harris, 2004; Evans, 2010). As Evans (2010) points out, the notion of discretion has re-emerged in social work debates in the face of an intensification of managerialism in the public sector and is discussed as a concept that encapsulates the tension between increased regulation of and the need for initiative and creativity in professional practice. From a social work perspective, one of the criticisms of Lipsky's approach has been that it does not distinguish explicitly between street-level bureaucrats in general and professionals in a stricter sense. Although Lipsky himself speaks often about "professionals" and refers to professions such as social workers, teachers, doctors or lawyers, his approach is general in the sense that it emphasises the common characteristics of frontline practitioners and their use of discretion in public services. However, studies that have adopted Lipsky's approach show the major discretional spaces of professionals in a stricter sense and the importance of an ethical obligation in professional discretion (Kelly, 1994; Evetts, 2006; Evans, 2010; Evans, 2011). Another critique questioned the applicability of Lipsky's approach in the context of social services, arguing that discretional spaces of social workers were replaced and suppressed by a managerialist culture (Howe, 1986, 1996). However, there is evidence that, despite an increasing managerial culture, social workers still have spaces of discretion which elude managerial control (Baldwin, 2004; Evans & Harris, 2004; Taylor & Kelly, 2006; Evans, 2010, 2011). Evans (2010) offers a detailed framework for the analysis of discretion in welfare services challenging the idea of discretion as worker freedom which has to be controlled

or tends even to be disestablished by management control. As Evans shows, managers' and practitioners' interests are not necessarily at odds and the issue of discretion has to be approached in a more nuanced way which looks at different factors configuring discretion in particular ways in particular settings. In this sense, discretion is discussed not only in relation to the single frontline practitioner as discretionary agent, but discretion is discussed more as the result of shared ideas about policy and practice, of collusive action to challenge or subvert aspects of policy which are seen as running counter to shared commitments and of continuing discourses within welfare services (Evans, 2010). This more nuanced approach to discretion is suitable for bringing together a professional perspective with a policy implementation perspective which conceives discretion in frontline work not only as possible distortion but which acknowledges that discretion is needed for the translation of policy goals into practice and which, at its best, appreciates frontline practice as site for a reflexive encounter and discursive decision making. However, regardless of how discretion is conceived, eventually frontline practitioners in public services possess discretion to a greater or lesser extent and, as Maynard Moody and Musheno (2003) have shown, they confront the rules of their jobs in relation to their own beliefs about the people they encounter creating their own views about their work and their (more or less open) ways of doing it. Thus, independently of how discretion is dealt with in policy implementation and in organisational settings, frontline practitioners continue to be important discretionary agents and their point of view is one important dimension for understanding how the translation of policies into practices eventually passes off. Thus, Lipsky's approach offers a still-valid framework for studying the practice of activation, both as a lens for empirical analysis and further theoretical advancements (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). Going back to a close reading of Lispky's insightful work remains an important reference, offering various contact points for bringing together a implementation- oriented perspective with a perspective asking for (professional) challenges in "activation work" and for the ways frontliners can do, and persist in, their difficult job.

2.4.2 Governing people: Frontline work as authority and power in situ

Another important perspective for looking at social policy, especially in its interactive aspects, is grounded in the poststructural approach of Foucauldian thinking, often labelled as Post-Foucauldian governmentality (McKee, 2009). This approach offers a valuable perspective for discerning issues of power and rule in different, but related, fields of activation. This perspective is "making visible the proliferation of sites and practices of governing, and linking the micro-politics of such practices to the larger mentalities or conceptions of rule" (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 45). In this sense, this approach has been embraced as a valuable theoretical perspective for a better understanding of power and rule in different fields of social policy and social welfare concerning the transformation of the state (Jessop, 2007; Lessenich, 2011), local government and public service reform (Newman, 2001; Clarke, 2008; Clarke et al., 2007), social welfare (Cruikshank, 1994, 1999; Dean, 1995, 1999; McDonald & Marston, 2005; Marston and Mc Donald, 2006; Sauer & Penz, 2017; Penz et al., 2017a, 2017b), social work (Kessl, 2005; Anhorn et al., 2008) and education (Ricken & Rieger-Ladich, 2004; Weber & Maurer, 2005; Fegter et al., 2015)[21].

Governmentality derives from the work of Michel Foucault, in particular the notion of governmentality (*gouvernementalité*) surfaces in his lectures at the Collège of France in 1978 and 1979 concerned with tracing the shift in ways of thinking about and exercising power (Foucault, 2004, 2006). As Bröckling et al. (2011) point out, Foucault's interest in governmentality signals a correction and refinement in his analysis of power. In his earlier work, he had approached the issue of power primarily in terms of struggle, war and confrontation, but from the mid 1970s on it turned out that his initial conceptions of the micro-physics of power had two serious limitations.

> On the one hand, the analytical accent lay mainly on the individual body and its disciplinary formation, and there was no consideration of more

21 Bröckling et al. (2011) trace the spread of governmentality studies during the 1990s also beyond the circle of Foucault's direct associates. At the end of the 1990,s the governmentality approach began to attract a great deal of interest also outside the French and Anglophone world, especially in Germany. In this context, a Foucauldian perspective became prominent e.g. also in the critical German debate on social work (Kessl & Krasmann, 2005; Kessl, 2005; Anhorn at al., 2008).

> comprehensive processes of subjectification. As a result, the analysis of power could not do justice to the double character of this process as a practice of subjugation and a form of self-constitution. On the other hand, in the critique of state centered approaches, focusing only on local practices and specific institutions like the hospital and the prison turned out to be insufficient. It was, it seemed, necessary to analyze the state's strategic role in the historical organisation of power relationships and the establishment of global structures of domination. What was needed, then, was a double expansion of the analytic apparatus, in order to appropriately account for both processes of subjectification and state formation. (Bröckling et al., 2011, pp. 1f)

With the concept of governmentality Foucault (2000) introduced a new theoretical orientation and guideline in his following work on power analysis allowing him to examine power relations from the perspective of "conduct of conduct" (p. 341). In this sense, the concept of governmentality mediates between power and subjectivity, showing how techniques of rule are tied to technologies of the self, and of how techniques of government recur in the ways the individual acts upon him or herself. Furthermore, the concept allows critical scrutiny between techniques of power and forms of knowledge, as governmental practices make use of specific rationalities, representations and interpretations. Thus, the concept of governmentality is particularly suitable for analysing processes of state formation in close connection to changing forms of subjectification. Foucault is interested in the long-term co-evolution of modern statehood and modern subjectivity. In this sense, Foucault's understanding of the state is first and foremost not one of a centralised structure, but rather one of a "tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques and totalization procedures" (Foucualt, 2000, p. 332). Thus, Foucault discusses the development of the modern state from the viewpoint of the genesis of political knowledge on the government of people. Hereby, he points out the linkage between political and pastoral power, the former as being derived from the ancient *polis* and organised as the public with its concern for law and universality, the latter as being rooted in the Christian religious conception centred upon the comprehensive guidance of the individual (Bröckling et al., 2011). Unlike the ancient political power approach to government, power derived from the notion of Christian pastor-

ate (*Pastoralmacht*) "is characterized by the development of analytic methods, techniques of reflection and supervision intended to secure the 'inner truth' of the individuals" (p. 3). Foucault observes the ongoing expansion and secularisation of such pastoral guidance techniques during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which eventually produced forms of subjectification the modern state and capitalist society could, in turn, develop. This introduction of a new rationality of government is central in Foucault's analysis of the emergence of liberal governmentality in the eighteenth century. This art of government has to face the problem of the "production costs" of freedom and necessitates new mechanisms of control and forms of intervention since liberal government "not only produces freedom threatened by its own dynamics, but the danger or permanent threat of 'insecurity' (in the form of poverty, unemployment, disease, etc.) is an existential premise and basic element of that very freedom" (Bröckling et al., 2011, p. 6). In this sense, liberalism creates a culture of danger as its psychological and cultural correlative which supplies the key to the moral dimension of the liberal art of government.

> When exposed to such danger, individuals are expected to cope with them and their entrepreneurial activities and individual responsibility are what decide social ascent and descent. Consequently, social inequalities are not the result of a mistakenly organized society but an indispensable element of its well arranged daily functioning. (Bröckling et al., 2011, p. 6)

Based on this conception of liberal governmentality Foucault discusses, at the end of the lecture series at the Collège de France, the further development of liberal positions in the twentieth century and criticises neo-liberalism associated with the Chicago School. According to Foucault, the programme of neo-liberalism involves a systematic expansion of the economic sphere into the social, extending the economy as a single social realm into a process of governing all human behaviour with government itself as a sort of enterprise and the individual learning "that freedom consists in not simply regarding oneself as an enterprise but becoming an entrepreneur of oneself and all the innate and acquired skills, talents and capacities that comprise 'human capital'" (Dean, 1999, p. 158).

A governmentality approach offers critical insights for social policy research. As McKee (2009) underlines, it illuminates "how the governable subject is discursively constituted and produced through particular strategies, programmes and techniques" (p. 468). By highlighting how mentalities of rule are made practical and technical within specific practices for directing human conduct, the governmentality perspective shows how political rationalities become manifest in the micro-practices of daily social life, linking what is politically desirable with what is (or should believed to be) practically - and this means also personally - possible (Rose/Miller, 1992). However, a governmentality approach is not primarily concerned with the "truth" or "falsity" of such political rationalities, rather it shows how they are constructed as objective knowledge in practice. In this sense, these political rationalities are not seen as fixed or universal, but they are conceived as heterogeneous and historically contingent and, thus, as represented by particular responses to particular problems under particular circumstances. In this sense, the governmentality approach offers a useful perspective on destabilising taken-for-granted ideas, beliefs and ways of thinking, to illustrate the inventedness of the world and, thus, to undermine the familiarity of the present (Burchell, 1993; Rose, 1999a). In the field of social policy, a governmentality perspective emphasises that government policies themselves are historically contingent social artefacts (Marston & McDonald, 2006) and, this way, it provides a critical perspective on considering alternate ways of thinking and acting on social issues (Dean, 1999). Furthermore, the governmental approach highlights how mentalities of rule involve specific organised practices which also embody a moral dimension purporting "'truths' about who we are or what we should be" (McKnee, 2009, p. 468). In this sense, it offers a valuable perspective on understanding how mentalities of rule arise in the moral discourses of activation.

> Governmentality-inspired analyses identify the moral and ethical discourses as they are played out in social practices, for example, in the programmes of workfare states. Active labour market policies are deeply embedded within a particular morality where social citizenship becomes conditional on individuals adopting an active disposition, narrowly defined in terms of economic participation. This moral set takes on a taken-for-granted, rule-like status in

> that economic participation is put forward as the key-maker of the responsible adult citizen. (McDonald & Marston, 2005, p. 379)

In this sense, a governmentality perspective looks beyond institutions or the political power of the state as one explicit authority (Rose & Miller, 1992). Rather it conceives the art of government in a broader sense as "conduct of the conduct" (Foucault, 2000, p. 341), as governing individuals not only through the domination of external constraints and actors but through private acts of self-government in different areas of live civil society and individuals are held responsible to. Such a perspective is, thus, particularly suitable for depicting the departure from traditional forms of hierarchical state control towards different forms of state intervention in the various domains of an enabling state (Newman, 2001) seeking to govern "through the responsible and prudential choices and actions of individuals on behalf of themselves and those for whom they feel an emotional bond or affinity" (Dean, 1999, pp. 133f). Looking at activation policies from this angle highlights that the endeavour to devolve responsibility and autonomy to "active" citizens represents a form of regulated freedom in which the ethical obligation of the individual to be his or her own entrepreneur capable of action is used as a political strategy to secure the ends of government. In this sense, projects of self-hood are not exempt from power; to the contrary, by isolating the self as terrain of action and making it responsible for exercising power upon itself, the arena of government is even further extended into the very depths of the personal (Rose, 1999b; Cruikshrank, 1999). In this context, frontline work plays a crucial role for the reproduction of subjectivities in activation regimes aligning social relations and identities with the end and means of state intervention. In fact, McDonald and Marston (2005) point out that case management has become a key technology in governing unemployment "representing a radical localization of governance wherein the rights and responsibilities between unemployed people and the state are articulated primarily in the relationship between the case manager and his or her client" (p. 374). Their research maps the contours through which power and authority operate in the micro-relations of case management and shows how unemployed people are subject to technologies of agency aimed at producing the desired active citizen capable of self-government and of managing his or her own

risks. The ethical self people should aspire to is characterised by motivation and perseverance, and case managers play a crucial role in the constitution of this project of self-hood of advanced liberalism. In this perspective, macro-rationalities of advanced liberalism are translated into the micro-practices of "activation work" and the problem of unemployment and the unemployed themselves are governed "at a distance through the inculcation of the right attitudes and behaviour representative of responsible self-government" (McDonald & Marston, 2005, pp. 390f). Such a perspective is particularly suitable for challenging the political rationality of activation and its orientation to the "problems" of unemployment and welfare state dependency, and for recognising frontline work in activation services as an important arena of government bringing, thus, an additional conceptual depth and a more critical view to a street-level perspective. According to McDonald and Marston (2005), the challenge raised by a governmentality-based analysis of activation programmes is "to resist the temptation to understand unemployment as a list of risk indicators or character deficits, and to insist on placing the problem of unemployment within a social context of power and authority" (p. 397). In this sense, McDonald and Marston conceive their contribution as a form of counter-politics able to examine how the category of the "unemployed" is produced and restrained by the relations of social rule embedded in the practice of activation. This means

> to pay close attention to how mutual recognition and respect are either fostered or eroded at the street-level of employment policies. The collaborative and empathetic qualities that are produced in relations between case managers and clients, for example, are lost when coercive authority is punitively exercised in the form of a sanction or "breach". It is at this level of interaction that citizenship and subjectivity are given meaning, a form of subjectivity that is sometimes very different than that intended by policy makers. (p. 397)

Governmentality as a theoretical approach has also been challenged, even though, as McKee (2009) argues, many of these critiques would be more accurately related to secondary positions, which appropriated Foucault's ideas. However, a first point of critique concerns the disregard of empirical reality in governmentality studies that often draw mainly on a discursive dimension

rather than on the more specific and concrete ways of governing in material practices. McKnee refutes this criticised disconnection between the study of mentalities of rule and the social relation they are embedded in by referring to Foucault's very own concern to analyse power relations through the antagonism of practical strategies. Nonetheless, McKnee agrees that some of the post-Foucauldian governmentaltity literature might be rightly labelled as discursive and as eschewing empirical analysis since it uses governmentality in a mainly diagnostic rather than descriptive way and is less concerned with the actual operation and the messy empirical actualities of systems of rule. This kind of orientation is obviously problematic within a more policy and practice-oriented research agenda and, eventually, it also fails to account for why the discursively-constituted governable subject might not turn up in practice, or as McKee (2009) points out:

> Whilst "reality" is perhaps of less concern to those solely concerned with tracing changes in thought through text-based discourse, it is a problem for those researchers interested in the effects of power at the micro-level and the lived experience of subjection; this is all the more significant given Foucualt's own methodological approach was concerned with the inherent ability of the subject to think and to act otherwise. (p. 474)

A second point of critique, related to the first one, has been that governmentality promotes a view of governing which reduces politics to rationality contributing, thus, to a omnipresent and totalising representation of power with no space for human agency and meaningful individual freedom and to a mechanistic view of the social as machine (Hunter, 2003). Of course, the strength of the governmentality approach lies in focusing on the discursive formation of the subject as governmental strategy. But it cannot be assumed that the reproduction of subjectivities happens automatically and that power necessarily always realises its effects (Clarke et al., 2007). In fact, precisely with regard to the implementation of workfare policies, McDonald and Marston (2006), e.g., show how the creation of the active employable citizen is subject to challenge and contestation from below—i.e. also from the frontline of activation services—and that practices of resistance and refusal are part of the processes of government or better that they even "are the sorts of cracks

and fissures that governmentality alerts us to look for" (p. 394). In this sense, also McKee (2009) underlines that proponents of governmentality as a top-down discursive approach have failed to accord practices of resistance the constitutive role which Foucault basically made available through his work.

> By ignoring the messiness of realpolitiks, this top-down discursive approach neglects that subjection is neither a smooth nor a complete project; rather one inherently characterized by conflict, contestation and instability. Moreover, it downplays the way in which governmental programmes and strategies are themselves internally contradictory, continually changing and capable of mutation. (p. 474)

Another critique of governmentality concerns Foucault's rejection of state theory, stressing that the emphasis on the dispersed and capillary nature of power illuminates the plurality of sites of government but downplays the influence of institutions and the central role of the state in shaping social policies. Concerning this matter, McKee (2009) raises the consideration that a close reading of Foucault reveals that even though he rejects a notion of the state as unified monolithic ruler, he nonetheless recognises the importance of the state as one site where power condenses and that centralising and decentralising forces in the exertion of power do not have to be necessarily seen as mutually exclusive. However, although McKee de-emphasises, or even refutes, the main points of critique by going back to Foucault's original thoughts, she argues for a "realist" governmentality approach (Stenson, 2008) as a useful way forward for theoretically-informed empirical research within the critical social policy tradition. McKee argues that going beyond a traditional discursive governmentality approach and complementing it with empirical accounts brings the micro-practices of local governing and the interpretations and behaviour of involved actors into focus and opens up the possibility of contradiction and contestation between and within governmental strategies. This "realist" approach is sensitive to the contingent temporal and spatial factors that may shape governmental rationalities and offers, thus, a more nuanced and finer analysis of governing in situ and of the complex struggles around the reproduction of subjectivities whilst retaining the analytical key of the governmentality perspective. In this sense, it offers a critical

and deepening completion to the street-level bureaucracy approach not excluding at the same time a perspective focused more on the agency of contextualised actors and their meaning-making and reflexive efforts.

> By focusing on strategies from below which aim to resist governmental ambitions, this emphasizes that subjects are reflexive and can accommodate, adapt, contest or resist top-down endeavours to govern them if they so wish. Recognizing multiple voices and the contested nature of identity may also negate the tendency to focus on mentalities of rule from the perspective of the rulers, programmers and planners alone, thereby introducing a more grounded perspective. (McKee, 2009, p. 479)

Darmon and Perez (2011) question the suitability of the application of the Foucauldian notion of "conduct of conduct" grounded in the theorisation of the liberal art of government. Their critique objects to the idea of government through freedom inadequately rendering

> the kind of fostering of stereotypical attitudes taking place through disciplinary instruction in the compulsory or strongly incentivized arrangements of activation programmes or through the performative actualization of a "career management" competence in the formally voluntary arrangements of lifelong guidance … and the kinds of mechanisms at work for the mobilization of staff as active and effective relays of the policy goals. (p. 78)[22]

According to Darmon and Perez, the way a governmentality approach theorises conduct makes a problematic conflation between freedom and adaptation. Instead, they go back to Weber and his distinction between life conduct (*Lebensführung*) as key to the spirit of modern capitalism, and adaptation as associated to the later mechanisation into bureaucratic capitalism. Adaptation is very different from self-determined life conduct, as it entails the erosion of the personal in facing up to the world, an aspect Darmon and Perez

22 Concerning this critique, it could be argued though that the governmental perspective refers to freedom in its ambivalence highlighting insecurity as an existential premise and basic element of that freedom, as pointed out above. The rationality of liberal government creates, hence, a culture of danger and introduces a moral dimension and new mechanisms of control which structure the conditions under which individuals can make use of freedom (Bröckling et al., 2011).

connect to Sennett's (1998) argument on the corrosion of character. In short, what Darmon and Perez (2011) criticise is

> that Foucault's notion of power as government unites what Weber had distinguished: administration (which, alongside the capitalist firm, seeks to mould "types of men" and their "form of life" amenable to the requirements of bureaucratic capitalism) and politics (the sphere of struggle, as well as of self-determination and affirmation, to be fought for by men and women whose life conduct is oriented to a cause). (p. 3)

In this context, the reference to this critique is not made for holding up the subtleties of a mere theoretical debate. On the contrary, Weber's notion of adaptation to the logic of bureaucracy offers an interesting additional perspective for the purpose of this study. Darmon and Perez highlight that the promotion of career and labour market guidance in the context of activation and mobilisation for work has been accompanied by the adoption of marketisation as the structuring principle for service provision and by the managerialisation of providers introducing a culture of targets and standards. However, Darmon and Perez sustain that beneath this external constraints the imposition of mangerialism on staff requires also a more direct fostering of adequate attitudes and the mobilisation of staff as active relays of the governmental aims of activation and guidance. Accordant strategies include the active remodelling of staff through recruitment, e.g. by recruiting younger people with less experience who are subsequently trained in-house, or even the redesign of professional qualifications in the light of the new mobilisation and activation agenda. But the findings of Darmon and Perez (2011)

> also reveal the importance, in that respect, of "tricks" inherent in managerial mechanisms across most programmes and centres studied: contradictory injunctions, the creation of dependencies, the misuse of collegiality and the engineering of the relaxation of professional stances put individuals in a position where, in order to "perform well", they may have to go not only against what they consider a "job well done" but even against what, as individuals as much as in their professional capacity, they hold as valuable. (p. 92)

Mechanisms working as such tricks can be the linking of employment continuity of staff with their target-related performance, the introduction of modulated sanctioning giving to frontline staff a key part in assessing the opportunities for sanctioning, the introduction of standardised procedures and software tools and the engineering of competition between colleagues. These mechanisms inevitably bind staff members to the rationality of the organisation, making practices of resistance increasingly difficult, regardless whether they are grounded in a more professional or a more vocational stance, to go back to Weber's notion of vocation as the passionate and personally-engaged everyday devotion to a task. Darmon and Perez (2011) point out that Weber's notion of adaptation is particularly pertinent for grasping processes such as "the disciplinary attuning of dispositions and affects, the instruction into stereotypical attitudes, the mobilization of self-interest, the introduction of mechanisms with corruptive effects on the capacity to preserve discretion of professional judgment" (p. 96). In this sense, they suggest that Weber's depicting of adaptation in bureaucratic capitalism can provide a new basis for conceptualising resistance to liberal governmental rationality. In fact, going back to Weber's categories offers a more accurately fitting key to understanding the mechanisms of staff mobilisation in activation services than the notion of conduct of conduct offered by a governmentality approach.

However, in spite of its possible theoretical and empirical limitations, a governmentality approach is useful for highlighting that frontline work in activation services has to be conceived as power in situ and as an important arena for the government of people. It offers a critical perspective which illuminates the role of frontliners in linking and transforming the mentalities of rule of activation to processes of subjectification as active and, hence, "deserving" citizens. In fact, as recent and very interesting contributions confirm, a governmentality approach continues to be an important point of reference for the critical analysis of activation practices. Emphasising the role of affects and emotions, these contributions focus on activation as affective labour and show how state bureaucracies use affective means of governance (Penz et al., 2017a, 2017b; Sauer & Penz, 2017). As Penz et al. (2017a) point out, "state power and social policies increasingly revolve around subtle, affective means of governance" (p. 540). Based on ethnographic fieldwork in public employment services, these authors highlight "affective entrepreneurialism"

as the dominant mode to effectively govern both frontline practitioners and jobseekers.

2.4.3 Meaning in action: Frontline practice as situated agency

A third theoretical perspective for looking at frontline work in activation services comes from a more constructivist approach to governance grounded in interpretive political science. The most notable contribution in this respect comes from political scientists Bevir and Rhodes (2006, 2008, 2010), who outline an interpretive approach to political science that recognises situated agency in a heterarchic field of state power and emphasises the importance of interpreting governance by looking at practices form the bottom up. Bevir and Rhodes highlight that practices of governance arise out of actions based on sets of beliefs informed by traditions. In this sense, they label their approach as decentred and anti-foundationalist. According to Bevir and Rhodes (2006) a decentred view on governance means

> to focus on the social construction of policy networks through the ability of individuals to create meaning. A decentred approach changes our view of governance. It encourages us to examine the way in which individuals create, sustain and modify social life, institutions and policies. It encourages us to recognize that institutional norms—or some logic of modernization—do not fix the actions of individuals. They arise from the beliefs individuals adopt against the background of traditions and in response to dilemmas.… [A] decentered approach implies that governance arises from the bottom up. (p. 91)

In this sense, the notion of decentredness in Bevir and Rhodes' approach does not, or at least not in the first instance, refer to the fragmentation of the policy arena and the displacement of the policy process to networks of actors inside and outside the traditional realms of the state. Rather, decenteredness stands for "a focus on practices of governance in which actors of all stripes understand issues and attempt to solve them by interpreting the situation at hand" (Waagenar, 2011, p. 92). In their book *The State as Cultural Praxis*, Bevir and Rhodes (2010) further develop their approach and seek to provide a theory of the state as "meaning in action" (p. vii). They seek to provide a theory of state authority and its exercise, which conceives the state as a set of practices

rooted in varied set of beliefs and which clearly arises from an anti-foundational perspective. According to Bevir and Rhodes it is not institutions (understood in a broad sense, e.g. also as policies) that completely fix actions, rather institutions are seen as contingent products of ongoing actions, struggles and negotiations. Their approach recognises the possibility of situated agency, making it the bedrock and the micro-level of their theory. They distinguish, however, between autonomy and agency. As anti-foundationalists they reject the idea of an autonomous self who can form beliefs and act outside any context. Rather, agency is always situated within cultural, historical and political contexts that shape thoughts and actions. In the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes (2010), the context of agency is conceived as the wider web of beliefs of the actor embedded in a historical tradition and instead of rationality associated with rational choice they propose the notion of local reasoning. They underline that

> reasoning is always local in that it occurs against the backcloth of agents' existing web of beliefs. The adjective local refers, in other words, to reasoning that always takes place against the background of a particular subjective or intersubjective web of beliefs. While the content of the relevant web of beliefs varies from case to case, there is no possibility of reasoning outside any such background. To insist on the local nature of reasoning is thus to preclude the autonomous and universal concept of reasoning and subjectivity associated with much rational choice theory. (p. 74)

In the context of this study, this approach offers a refined understanding of activation work sensitive to the meanings of frontliners as situated actors and their respective implications of policy outcomes (Maron, 2014). In this sense, the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes (2010) is highly suitable for bringing people back in, instead of as autonomous rational actors, as situated agents informed by specific political contexts but with their own capacities of local reasoning, meaning-making and acting, giving, thus, shape on their part to the web of beliefs and traditions they are embedded in.

The main features of this approach can be usefully combined with the other approaches outlined above. On the one hand, it deepens a street-level perspective, adding a more nuanced concept of agency as situated in a web

of beliefs and historical traditions to the more pragmatic view of the use of discretion as needed for real-world solutions. This way, it connects the interpretations of situated agents like street-level staff with the background of welfare culture as beliefs that surround, inform and either justify or oppose social policy and forms of welfare state intervention (Pfau-Effinger, 2005). Thus, the focus lies not only on individual street-level bureaucrats dealing with dilemmas to get their job done, but also on what their own job means to them, what beliefs inform them in their agency, when they encounter dilemmas conceived not only as resulting from scarce resources such as time and information, but rather as resulting from beliefs that contrast with the ideational background of policy, and how they react to these dilemmas on the basis of their own beliefs and understandings. At the same time, the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes is sympathetic to the decentred approach to power and authority of a governmentality perspective. However, it leaves more space for the role of human agency and hence also for the possibility of resistance and change with respect to mentalities of rule and rationalities of governing people in the arena of frontline work in activation services.

Wagenaar (2011) discusses Bevir and Rhodes' approach as an example of interpretive policy analysis which falls in the classical hermeneutic tradition. According to Wagenaar, the hermeneutic approach to meaning

> focuses on the way individual agents move about in this background of understanding, on how they interpret themselves in light of it. The task of the hermeneutic researcher is to make the actions of individual agents intelligible against a backdrop of shared understandings and routines. (p. 40)

As Waganaar argues, hermeneutic interpretation is a valid and sophisticated tool in understanding policy problems, which offers a decisive added value to traditional empiricist policy analysis approaches. In this sense, this approach offers a valid perspective for a bottom-up approach on the implementation of activation policies able to grasp frontline work as meaning in action and to highlight how frontliners as policy actors shape policy outcomes against the background of their very own understanding of their role and their job. But, despite its focus on individual understanding and its classification within the classical hermeneutic tradition, Bevir and Rhodes's perspective also seems

to be open for a more dialogical approach on meaning, focusing on its social and practical nature. As Waagenar (2011) points out, dialogical approaches on meaning share the principles that the activity of understanding is grounded in every day experiences and that understanding proceeds through dialogue between actors or actors and the world, affecting both parties involved. A dialogical approach to meaning conceives understanding as always historically effected, imperfect, partial and incomplete but it opens up for dialogue as the "fusions of horizons", to use Gadamer's terms. Gadamer (1972) uses the concept of horizon to underline the epistemic claim that understanding is not possible as a detached observer but occurs from within a particular "horizon" that is determined by our historically-determined situatedness. However, understanding is not imprisoned within a static or unchanging horizon, rather it is a universal and ongoing process susceptible to change through the encounter with other horizons of understanding. In this sense, Gadamer conceives understanding as a matter of negotiation, of coming to an agreement through the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Such an approach to understanding also reintroduces an ethical moment in hermeneutics.

> Understanding as a fusion of horizons, a concept that is based on our being-in-the-world as engaged agents, collapses the fact-value dichotomy. The corroding agent here is the abandoning of the pursuit of control over knowledge and, by implication, over the object of our understanding. A dialogical notion of understanding implies that we can never have full control over that which we try to understand. This works in two ways. First, I am not fully transparent to myself and, second, I must be willing to open myself to the other. I always understand the other, the object of my understanding, from the perspective of my horizon, but the latter has itself been formed by my cultural and historical background. (Wagenaar, 2011, pp. 206f)

On the basis of this interpretation of understanding, Wagenaar (2011) argues that narrative approaches can offer valid insights for understanding policy implementation. Wagenaar is aware of the risk of an oversell of stories in the social sciences and of the risk of misapplying them as a means of giving a gloss of human meaning to the mundane business of research. But he points out that stories have a function, that they work and stand for a distinct mode

of knowing which, by implication, constitutes also the challenge in narrative analysis, namely

> to demonstrate the particular *narrative*—as opposed to logico-deductive, classificatory, or straightforwardly informational—contribution that storytelling makes to a policy, an organization, a decision. This narrative work ranges from the way that storytelling contributes to practical judgement, to the way policy makers move about in a world of indeterminate outcomes, emerging time, and deep conflict, to the more straightforward representation of political doctrine. What these narrative functions have in common is the insight that stories work relationally. The meaning of a story is not locked up in the constituent elements of the text, but is constructed—actively, dynamically—in a continuous interaction among the storyteller, the elements of the story, his audience and the environment they share. (pp. 209f).

In this sense, stories are dialogues working as an epistemic strategy in order to correspond knowing with coming to an understanding. This implies that stories are open-ended, provisional and temporary scenarios in the process of understanding and mastering everyday reality, not by reducing it to a simplified model but by "doing justice to the whole *buzzing blooming confusion* of factual, affective and moral ambiguities that characterize ordinary life" (Wagenaar, 2011, p. 212). In their narrative analysis of street-level bureaucracy, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) show how stories are important for understanding the process of practical judgement in the inevitable tension between following rules and procedures and accommodating the spirit of the law to the particulars of concrete people in ordinary everyday situations.

> The world of cops, teachers and counsellors is a baffling terrain, dense with laws, rules and procedures; bounded by overlapping hierarchical and agency relationships; and populated with the diverse and often hard to read faces of citizens, clients, supervisors and coworkers. It is a world where identity and moral judgements are bound up with the quotidian work of the state. This is the frontline of public service. (p. 8)

Frontline stories show how frontline workers move about in this baffling terrain and in the tension between legalism and accommodation, how they come to an understanding about what is fair or the right thing to do in a given situation and how they master in this way their everyday reality on the frontline of public services. Frontline workers adopt a narrative mode of knowing and accounting since the large questions, ambiguities and dilemmas rarely present themselves as abstract issues but usually in the guise of concrete people (Wagenaar, 2011), or as Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) point out:

> Front-line workers do not think abstractly about the deserving poor: they deal with the blind woman who qualifies for assistance but has a personality disorder that will forever limit her ability to function in society. They do not worry about the policy of zero tolerance for drugs when they ignore the small-scale marijuana dealing of a hard working day laborer. (p. 23)

Of course, these representations of people in subjective stories are never indifferent, but they indicate beliefs and moral positionings and, eventually, they serve to establish plausible connections between interpretations and subsequent behaviour and actions. In this sense, stories do not only enlarge the understanding of a situation but at the same time they serve as instructions and justifications of actions in the situation at hand. Analysing the stories of welfare officials Wagenaar (2006, 2011) reveals the complex work of practical judgement in the field of administrative discretion in welfare services.

> In fact, the whole distinction between rule application and discretion, between rule and setting, collapses in the light of this kind of narrative analysis. Administrative work *is* practical judgement. It involves a careful balancing of incompatible demands, the judging of clients to obtain ground for acting, the weighing of the effects of one's actions, on both the client and the organization, a constant calculation of personal risk, an ongoing positioning of oneself in one's relevant social environment, a careful calibration of what is right and what is just in a particular, concrete situation.… Much of this work takes place

> tacitly, behind the scenes, in the workflow of an experienced administrator who acts on the situation at hand. (Wagenaar, 2011, p. 218)

In this context, it must be highlighted that the implementation of policies is sustained by highly resistant narratives of policies. The process of policy making is faced with its inescapable characteristics of indeterminacy, unpredictability, conflict and the imperative to act, and policy narratives provide the necessary assumptions for decision making (Waagenar, 2011). In this sense, frontline stories from the frontline of activation services have to be critically scrutinised also for the underlying narratives of activation, their meaning to *situated agents* and their adoption and perpetuation (or challenge) in frontline practice. Maron (2014), e.g., stresses the importance of acknowledging the culturally and politically embedded practice of situated agents in the production of individualised activation services. According to Maron (2014), a constructivist approach to governance "enables us to reconstruct the meaning-making that underpins the actions of situated agents so that we can understand the emerging actions and interactions between them" (p. 106). Maron adopts this perspective for scrutinising the governance of institutions and individuals in the Israeli welfare-to-work programme, showing how beliefs, discourses and local practices of meso-level regulation and street-level work contribute to the emergence of a new and stringent activation mode. He demonstrates that the meaning-making of situated agents is essential for examining shifts in the forms of governance and their implications. Ultimately, the mode of activations reconfigures the social contract between the state and its citizens via

> *intensive intimacies*: a conflicted micro social-space governed with little discretion and imbued with a reformative vision of the relations between the state and its participants. This reformative vision is based on a model of the resilient citizen: a proactive and responsible participant, contributing via flexible labor to the Israeli neoliberal project. (Maron, 2014, p. 21)

Of course, also interpretive approaches in policy analysis have been object of critiques. Bevir and Rhodes (2006) defend their interpretive approach against common criticisms by pointing out that its distinctiveness is given by the ex-

tent it privileges meanings as ways to grasp action and it holds that beliefs and practices are constitutive of each other. Such an approach is challenged by positions that want to defend political science as relying on hard data, experimental testing and methodological rigour and, thus, dismiss interpretations as subjective, fuzzy and impressionistic. Bevir and Rhodes (2006b) respond to these critiques by challenging positivist idols and pointing out that "an interpretive approach explores the ways in which social practices are created, sustained and transformed through the interplay and contest of the beliefs embedded in human activity" (p. 71). In this sense, their approach relies on the philosophical claim "that meaning does not merely put a particular affective or evaluative gloss on things, but that is somehow *constitutive* of political actions, governing institutions and public policies" (Wagenaar, 2011, p. 4) and derives from there its epistemological and methodological principles. In fact, as has already been shown in Chapter 1, also in comparative welfare state research the importance of ideas has been brought back on stage and the reception of Bevir and Rhodes' approach shows that the point that policy analysis needs to pay more attention to the ideas and meanings propounded by policy actors themselves is increasingly taken into account.[23] Analysing third way welfare reforms in Germany and the United Kingdom, Hudson et al. (2008) e.g. assess the analytical utility of this approach against institutionally-rooted claims of path dependency. Although they underline that narratives cannot explain everything and that reform trajectories in different contexts continue to be best explained by institutionalised policy legacies and varying policy networks, they also acknowledge that ideas and policy narratives are useful for understanding the nature and form of social policy reforms. Accordingly, they recommend multi-theoretic approaches and a closer synthesis of different perspectives centred around ideas, interests and

23 This awareness is reflected by a group of different approaches in social policy analysis. Hajer and Wagenaar (2003), for instance, coined the term "deliberative policy analysis" and Fischer and Forester (1993) introduced the term "argumentative turn" in order to emphasise the relevance of argumentation, language and deliberation in the policy-making process and to challenge the epistemological limitations of a neopositivist and technocratic approach to policy analysis (see also Fischer and Gottweis, 2012). To some extent, the interpretive approach to political science by Bevir and Rhodes comes close to these differently-coined approaches and it can in any case be attributed to a group of approaches which are sensitive to situative contexts and situated agencies and emphasise the relevance of local practices of deliberation, argumentation and interpretation in the policy making process.

institutions in order to understand processes of policy change. In this sense, ideas can provide a part of the picture. An interpretive approach is, hence, particularly suitable for exploring and understanding what happens on the different levels of the policy implementation process and how what arrives as policy on the ground is shaped by the meaning-making capacities of situated agents. Thus, this approach offers an important perspective on frontline work in activation services, giving a deeper theoretical underpinning of a street-level perspective on the one hand, and providing a critical perspective that is more sensitive to the situated agency of the policy actors involved on the other.

2.5 On the Frontline of Activation Services: Current Research Perspectives

The awareness that frontline work matters has been reflected, over the past decade, in the European context too by a growing body of literature based on studies which look at the frontline of local welfare and employment services and take into account the key role of frontline staff for policy implementation and service delivery in order to tell the full workfare story (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; van Berkel, 2017). Much of this work is informed by Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach, which has seen an international revival in the analysis of contemporary welfare interactions and across different perspectives stemming from policy implementation, social administration and social work (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). This revival of the street-level bureaucracy approach must be seen against the background of the activation turn. As already pointed out, the shift towards activation policies and services has changed the very nature of welfare interactions at the frontline of services, as they are increasingly founded on people-changing technologies (Meyers at al. 1998), which means on active interventions aimed at ensuring or changing individual behaviour, attitudes and compliance. In this context, the role of frontline workers has been considerably transformed and raises new questions as to its political, normative and ethical implications (Hasenfeld, 1999; Kjørstad, 2005; Adler, 2008, 2013; Fletcher, 2011; Nothdurfter, 2016). Kjørstad (2005), for example, underlines the ideological power of workfare, "precisely because it is an imprecise and ambiguous concept" (p. 389). Thus,

the unclear rhetoric of workfare allows for considerable variation in the use of discretion, and individual social workers can exercise authority in a very clear and concrete manner. Social workers find themselves in challenging ethical positions to deal with these spaces between a bureaucratic rationality and their own professional ethics. Kjørstad's findings (2005), however, support

> the idea that the social workers in the study are loyal to the workfare policy *and* the idea that social workers experience a considerable degree of freedom of action when implementing this policy. They often *take the bull by the horns* and use their freedom to make decisions that are based upon professional discretion in a very active way, most particularly, by *not* imposing conditions upon recipients of economic and social assistance. (p. 392)

There are many similar exemplary studies on frontline work and the role of frontline staff in local welfare agencies and public employment services in different countries such as the US, the UK, Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Australia, Norway, etc. (see, for example, Marston et al., 2005; Kjørstad, 2005; Wright, 2006; Jewell, 2007; Thoren, 2008, Watkin-Hayes, 2009; Dubois, 2010; van Berkel et al., 2010; van Berkel, 2011; Røysum, 2013; Jessen & Tufte, 2014; Tabin & Perriard, 2016; van Berkel & Knies, 2016, 2017)[24].

The notion of discretion is a central issue in all these studies and, although discretion is not new as a topic, there seems to be agreement on its increased importance in the context of activation policies and on the fact that "frontline workers play a key role in providing or denying access to welfare state provisions, in treating clients in a harsh or more lenient way, in distributing sticks and carrots." (van Berkel et al., 2010, p. 449). However, the findings of these studies differ in their emphasis on different aspects and are far from being unambiguous. On the one hand, it is pointed out that in the context of activation, street-level decision making processes increasingly involve evaluations of individual behaviour and therefore discretion is more important than when decision making is part of a mere administrative process. On the other hand, they also show that frontliners themselves are faced with stronger regulations and standardisations of activation programmes

24 For an overview see van Berkel (2017).

and social assistance schemes and subject to greater individualised pressure to deliver certain outcome targets, while the time available for the direct contact with clients or service users is decreasing. As Wright (2013) highlights, there is "a disjuncture between the language of professional discretion used to justify the permissive 'black box' model of delivery design and the managerialist type of performance regime that relies on 'procedural governance' to exert control over implementation practices" (p. 831). However, these ambiguities in the debate on discretion are not so much related to different perspectives or research findings as to the very ambiguous nature of discretion itself. As has already been pointed out referring to Lipsky's street-bureaucracy approach, a certain degree of discretion is required in order to implement policies in complex situations and to translate them into real-world solutions. At the same time, discretion is always also limited and subject to regulations and managerial control in organisations. It is always in this field of tension that discretion is generated and has to be managed. Anyway, the idea of activation and the goals of activation policies as part of a certain political and governmental project (Clarke, 2005) constitute a very specific background against which the idea of discretion and the questions as to how and on which basis it is managed by frontline staff in activation services are of critical importance.

Van Berkel et al. (2010) summarise the different sources of discretion. First, it is the nature of regulations that can have different characteristics such as openness, goal diversity or ambiguity and, hence, affect and pre-structure discretionary spaces. Secondly, discretion is determined by the organisational characteristics of street-level bureaucracies, which define the tasks and, at least to a certain extent, also the procedures for frontline work and, thus, the degree of decision making authority delegated to frontline staff. A third resource for discretion lies in the nature of the work itself. Areas in which the application of clear technologies is neither possible nor conducive rely on a higher degree of discretion (Brodkin, 2007). Moreover, also the term and intensity of client contacts as well as the range of effective decision options in frontline work determine the room for discretion. A fourth source for discretion refers to the nature of the relationship between frontline workers and clients with its power implications. Giving clients real opportunities for voice and choice can work only on the basis of an effectively-available discretionary

space. As fifth and last source of discretion, van Berkel et al. mention new models of service provision that involve a variety of actors through intra- and interagency cooperation, quasi-markets and professional cooperations which require discretionary room for the negotiation of solutions.

However, the interesting question is how discretion is eventually dealt with in street-level practice and how different organisational aspects as sources of discretion impact on the daily conduct of frontline staff. Jewell and Glaser (2006) lay out a general framework for investigating how organisational settings mediate between policy goals and frontline behaviour. This framework distinguishes different aspects. The first one is authority as the ability of frontliners to impact on their clients by virtue of their position. Secondly, role expectations refer to their attitudes and interpretations of policy programmes and to what they think their role is in this context. Thirdly, the workload aspect refers to numbers of cases as well as to tasks and decisions required. The fourth aspect, client contact, refers to the frequency, amount of time and the quality of interaction with clients. As a fifth aspect, Jewell and Glaser highlight knowledge and expertise, encompassing education, training, programmatic knowledge, and knowledge of resources. Finally, the last aspect is given by incentives as formal and informal systems of rewards and sanctions that affect which courses of action frontliners take in practice (Jewell & Glaser, 2006).

Taylor and Kelly (2006) refine the notion of discretion by distinguishing three different dimensions. The first one, rule discretion, "is bounded by legal, fiscal or organizational constraints. Rules may be laid down in the statutes or ordinances of the organization or reflect legislation and directives from government. In theory, the more rules there are the less discretion there will be at the street level." (p. 631). A second dimension of discretion, value discretion, is determined by value orientations and ideas of fairness and justice, often also involving codes of conduct or professional codes of ethics. In this sense, "there is an expectation that the professional can be trusted to abide by established and normative professional practice and will also be expected to exercise his or her judgement based on training, knowledge and experience." (p. 631). The third dimension, task discretion, relates to the actual ability to carry out given tasks in daily street-level practice. In spite of increased managerial scrutiny in the pursuit of targets, tasks often continue

to be complex and to require discretionary action in order to be carried into execution. Of course, these three dimensions of discretion are interrelated and, as Taylor and Kelly (2006) point out,

> even within a rule-bound system where accountability is tight, there will always be situations in which street-level bureaucrats will be required to exercise discretion. Rules may not be operable in unpredictable situations. There will always be a high degree of task discretion at street level because there is more than one way of carrying out tasks, which for many professionals remain complex. However, rules influence tasks, which, in turn, determine the extent to which values come into their performance. (p. 639)

These contributions show that the formation and handling of discretion depends on very different aspects and is, thus, quite a complex process. It could also be argued that the boundaries between sources of discretions and ways of dealing with it, or in other words, between discretion as given and discretion as used, are fluid. In this sense, discretion not only depends on how it is determined by external factors and nested in regulations and organisational aspects, but discretion as room for situated decisions and agency is also shaped by understandings and interpretations of individual actors. The active exertion of discretion might also depend on interpretations and practices frontline workers associate with their position and role as well as on different professional identities and individual attitudes and beliefs. In fact, as Marston (2013) underlines for the context of activation studies, there have been further conceptual refinements of the street-level bureaucracy approach with a stronger analytical focus on the attitudes and actions of frontline workers. There are, for example, different studies from the US that highlight how street-level bureaucrats deter people from making claims on the state (De-Parle, 2004), challenge or adopt racist sterotypes (Watkin-Hayes, 2009, 2013) or apply sanctions in ways that reinforce societal race and class divisions (Soss et al., 2012).

Dunn (2013) triggered a vivid debate on views and experiences of people who work with unemployed people. Dunn's provocative contribution highlights the viewpoint of frontline workers that many clients "remained unemployed because they were choosy in the jobs they were willing

to undertake" (p. 799) and their endorsement of the view "that a 'dependency culture' exists in households and neighbourhoods that have experienced joblessness for several generations" (p. 799). Without getting into detail of some questionable assumptions of individualistic and cultural explanations of unemployment on which Dunn bases his arguments, the interesting aspect in this context is that he calls "for opening up the employment policy debate to the views of other actors, particularly those at the front-line of activation policies" (Marston, 2013, p. 819). This is, indeed, also acknowledged by Marston in his contesting reply to Dunn. But, as Marston (2013) points out,

> simply because a sample of workers believe a culture of dependency is widespread, it does not follow that this justifies current policy parameters—as to do so would conflate the views of workers with the views of the unemployed. Indeed, some workers probably need to be challenged on their views about the unemployed, in the same way that employers need to be encouraged to employ older workers, people with disabilities or single parents. Arguably, the disciplinary welfare gaze needs to be turned on its head and focused backwards to the state, employers and front-line workers. And in explaining why these workers might have these views we should look at the conditions of their work, their caseloads, their employment conditions and the level of resources they have at their disposal to invest in people to help them make the transition from unemployment to a decent job. (p. 824)

Similarly, Wright (2013) also criticises Dunn in her reply, not only for completely neglecting the harmful effects of unemployment when speaking about attitudes towards employment and job search motivations, but also for the missing contextualisation of his account. Wright (2012, 2013) maintains that frontline workers have to be seen as active moral agents which "mediate transitions between unemployment and employment through social processes of interactional accomplishment" (2013, p. 832). Wright (2013) calls attention to the fact that

> these processes are, by definition, social. Thus shared moral frameworks, including popularised anti-welfare myths, are as likely to inform the world views of activation workers as they are of anyone else sharing a context in

> which attitudes have been hardening … to offer diminishing support for unemployed people and benefit recipients …. However, "activation workers" are situated uniquely in being able to apply these views in live interaction with unemployed people. In this situated social context, belief in stigmatising anti-welfare myths takes on a new potency, with the capacity to convert social suffering into direct emotional and psychological penalites …. Thus, the unfounded belief in "chosen worklessness" and "third generation" "dependency" constitutes an additional layer of re-moralisation that occurs at implementation level and may result in direct discrimination and disempowerment. (p. 832)

In this sense, Wright (2013) welcomes insights into the role of powerful actors engaged in the implementation of activation policies.

> The analysis of what street-level workers believe and how these beliefs influence their daily interactive practices with users is essential to understanding how contemporary social rights and responsibilities are mediated. It is essential that continued study of the motivations and actions of frontline workers and their clients is conducted rigorously and contextualised accurately within contemporary socio-economic, political, policy and labour market contexts. (p. 835)

Van Berkel (2017) provides a comprehensive literature review of studies that focus on the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work policies in Europe pointing out their contributions in relation to the policy, governance, organisational and occupational contexts of frontline work practices. He shows that research on the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work policies is catching up in the European context, concerning, however, overwhelmingly single-country studies. Doing comparative research on street-level delivery as a multidimenasional and highly contextualised phenomenon is rather complex. However, more comparative work is important to better understand how discretion as granted and used is nested within the different contextual factors of frontline work (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). Van Berkel (2017) points out some core issues of frontline welfare-to-work practices, such as client selection processes, the service ideals of personalisation or individualisation, processes of

categorising and classifying clients, sanctioning behavior, the extent of prioritising activation and, last but not least, questions regarding outcomes frontline workers try to realise and means they use to reach these outcomes.

It can be summarised that research findings on activation work are consistent in acknowledging the implementation behaviour of street-level workers as an important aspect of policy implementation and in pointing out that discretionary leeway in street-level practice, although appraised in different ways, has an important impact on the contours and divergences of policy implementation (Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003; Ricucci, Meyers, Lurie & Han, 2004; Ricucci, 2005; Gofen, 2014). Moreover, it has been found that policy emphasis of frontline workers depends on their overall "policy dispositions" (May & Winter, 2007, p. 453), which result both from understandings of policy goals and evaluations but also from professional knowledge and very personal attitudes and worldviews (May & Winter, 2007; Hill, 2003; Berg, 2006; Wright, 2012, 2013; Marston, 2013). In his literature review, van Berkel (2017) concludes that

> first the studies make convincingly clear that frontline practices tell a story about what welfare-to-work is and how it affects people's lives that remains hidden when we study formal policies only. Second, the studies show that frontline practices are shaped by a complex set of context characteristics that include, but certainly are not limited to, characteristics of formal policies. And finally, the studies provide evidence that frontline practices matter: in terms of workers' attitudes to clients, in terms of how clients are treated and the services provided to (or withheld from) them, in terms of the outcomes that are strived for and in terms of the outcomes actually realized. (p. 30)

However, although different authors have emphasised the aspect of frontline workers' professional socialisation and identities for their understanding of their work and responsibilities in the policy context and, thus, also for their ways of handling discretion (Hill, 2003; Berg, 2006), in the context of activation these aspects are still unconsidered to a large extent and a debate on the professionalisation of "activation work" is still, at least in the mainstream debate on activation work, rather marginal (van Berkel et al., 2012. van Berkel, 2017).

There are different contributions which discuss the impact of public service reforms on the role and the professional identities of frontline workers. Berg (2006), for example, investigates the interdependence between organisational and management forms and professional and individual identities. She identifies different cultural alternatives of action and communities of meaning in organisations and underlines that attitudes and preferences are not individual but contextual. Berg shows that the transformation of public services towards market-based and private sector management models challenges traditional professional cultures and identities in public services. Important positive properties of the traditional public servant are increasingly threatened and new values and demands require a new mindset of the public workforce. In this sense, Berg argues that the public sector will, on the one hand, attract new types of employees and, on the other, provoke both scepticism and resistance and start processes of re-socialisation and change of communities of meaning in organisations.

In a similar way, Røysum (2013) discusses the development of social workers' role in the context of the reform of welfare services in Norway. The core element of the reform has been the introduction of one-stop-shops intended to meet the challenge of poorly-coordinated public agencies and fragmented services and to reduce this way passive economic transfers, too. These new offices incorporate all state-funded social and employment services and their different support programmes. Roysum points out how this one-stop principle is not a mere organisational issue but that it entails also the simplification and standardisation of ways of thinking, "in sense of 'one way of thinking'" (p. 720), among employees. In this sense, Røysum critically discusses the dilemma of how to combine "one-stop service principles as a generalist 'light' approach" (p. 708) with complex situations and special competencies of a professional social work background. Social workers are faced with increased standardisations and less professional autonomy in their work, and services, in the end, risk being less flexible, individualised and integrated and, instead, concentrated on supporting the shortest route into paid employment without taking into account personal circumstances and needs.

Against the background of active welfare state reforms in the Netherlands, van Berkel et al. (2010) explore the role of frontline workers, focusing specifically on frontline staff involved in activating social assistance recipients.

They investigate how active welfare state reforms have influenced discretionary spaces at the frontline of local welfare agencies, how discretion is managed and how frontline workers cope with it. The findings suggest that frontline work in local welfare agencies is subject to considerable change and that

> increased discretion is an important element of this process of change, even though it is constrained and conditioned in several ways. Local welfare agencies operate under a financial regime that strongly stimulates gate-keeping and social assistance exits. Resources are often scarce, caseloads and workloads are sometimes high and furthermore, frontline workers need capacities and skills to carry out their tasks, which is not self-evident, as many are trained as benefit administrators. In using their room for discretion, frontline workers need to find a balance between clients' needs, organisational, financial and work conditions, and their own perceptions of their role and professional identities. (p. 460)

Van Berkel et al. identify different frontline work identities. Some workers display a bureaucratic attitude and see their task in the consequent and strict application of the given rules. Other frontline workers are less rule and more goal-oriented. Their focus lies on the realisation of the policy goal to integrate clients into the labour market. Accordingly, rules and regulations are understood first and foremost as a means to the overall policy goals and used in a more flexible way. Still other frontliners have a more protective attitude towards their clients. They are classified as care workers who are less exclusively focused on labour market integration and "consider the notion of individual client responsibility as problematic" (van Berkel et al., 2010, p. 459). Besides these individual differences in the orientations and interpretations of frontliners, the interesting point highlighted is, however, "a clear though not unambiguous shift from a bureaucratic towards a more professional treatment of frontline workers combined with attempts to introduce a more performance-oriented style of management." In this sense, van Berkel et al. relate to Noordegraaf's (2007) work on professionalism in ambiguous public domains, pointing out that frontline workers are transformed from traditional policy administrators into so-called hybrid professionals or, as van Berkel et al. (2010) put it, into "professionals without a profession" (p. 462). They ob-

serve that, on the one hand, professionalisation is becoming more important as an issue in frontline work. On the other hand, they remain careful in their interpretation of this new trend and point out a lack of professionalism which not only makes activation work a rather individual project for frontline workers but entails severe risks for clients, too. As van Berkel et al. (2010) state,

> in the current situation, frontline workers are professionals without a profession: there is no officially-recognised body of knowledge that activation frontline workers can rely on, there are no vocational associations, there is no occupationally controlled labour market, there are no systematic processes of professional accountability. By taking the route of professionalisation in the absence of a more or less clearly-defined "profession", welfare agencies have started a project that may involve considerable risks for the clients they are serving—and performance management will not solve this, as it exactly presupposes that frontline workers know what they should do (and are able to do to reintegrate unemployed people into the labour market. (p. 462)

Van Berkel and van der Aa (2012) deepen this issue and ask if activation work should be thought of as an administrative function or as a professional service provision. They try to focus on some core characteristics of "activation work" and to examine what the literature says about the possibilities of providing activation services in a professional way. As they point out, two different approaches can be distinguished in literature.

The first and often rather critical approach discusses activation work using social work as the referential professional model and focusing on the question as to whether activation policies with their strong emphasis on individual responsibilities and obligations are compatible with professional social work standards. In this respect, van Berkel and van der Aa refer to Hasenfeld's work (1999, 2000, 2010), in which he explores the prospects for social work in the context of US welfare-to-work policies. Hasenfeld points out that the mandatory nature of welfare to work makes a social service orientation impossible. According to Hasenfeld, the professional model required for the provision of social services is compromised and corrupted by bureaucratic control and monitoring of clients and by their sanctioning in cases of non-compliance. These circumstances not only jeopardise a belief system

based on professional values and the provision of services which account for individual situations but also make it hard to establish relations of mutual trust between frontline staff and clients.[25] Similar critiques and arguments are echoed by a variety of studies on "activation work" which point out the tension frontline workers experience between the compulsory nature of activation programmes and the use of sanctions as the source of a bureaucratic and rule-bound rationality model on the one hand and discretionary spaces for individualised service provisions based on a professional rationality on the other. These studies differ in their emphasis on administrative or professional elements, and some contributions point out the ambivalent concomitance of both de-professionalisation and re-professionalisation processes of activation work (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012). Many contributions are, however, rather critical about activation work as professional activity and as a field for professional social work.

> Monitoring and sanctioning unemployed people are considered incompatible with a professional work (or, at least, social work) repertoire, which makes the prospects of the social work profession rather gloomy given the increasing emphasis in social policies on obligations, sanctions, reciprocity and individual responsibilities. (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012, p. 497)

Anyway, although there seems to be common concern about the corruption of professional values under such circumstances and about the prospects of social work in the field of "activation work", it might be rather difficult to find

25 Hasenfeld (2010) proposes a framework to explain the path from a policy to its outcomes. The proposed framework resembles a Russian nested doll consisting of different shells or spheres which include "the policy design, the institutional and political economy of the local community in which the policy is implemented, the strategic choices made by the organisation, the responses and adaptations of the workers, and the resulting worker-client relations and their consequences" (p. 148). Hasenfeld applies this framework to the implementation of the welfare reform in the US and points out that the difficult conditions of street-level work and the ensuing daily practices of workers to deal with them have significant consequences on the well-being of clients. "Facing large caseloads, difficult clients, limited resources, pressures to meet participation requirements and to reduce the welfare rolls, workers develop their own set of routines to adapt to these constraints. Typically, these routines give greater emphasis to completing paper work over attention to the clients; limit interest in the client biography; typify the clients into a few pre-determined categories; route them into prescribed and predictable service trajectories; provide the minimally needed monitoring; and give preferences to 'good' clients while penalizing those who make demands on their time." (Hasenfeld, 2010, pp. 159f).

general answers and outlooks on these issues. What might be of crucial importance is how these ambiguities and challenges are, eventually, dealt with. As Kjørstand (2005) reports,

> social workers … *do* reflect on the ambiguity of their positions. They express serious concern about the coherence of their own practices and this is a *reassuring* quality of their practice.… One of the great challenges of social work under the policy of workfare is being able to tackle several interconnected practices and rationalities simultaneously. (p. 395)

What makes it additionally difficult to speak about the outlooks for "activation work" as a professional activity and as a field for social work, is the fact that these issues can hardly be discussed in an abstract way and without accounting for contextual factors (van Berkel et al., 2017). The nature of "activation work" and the challenges and dilemmas frontline workers have to face highly depend on the effective mix of administrative and professional elements and the decisionmaking rationalities underlying the use of discretion in practice. These issues again are not only defined by formal conceptualisations of "activation work" or its interpretations on the basis of both individual attitudes and professional identities. They are strongly determined also by the contingencies of the organisational context and the management styles applied. High caseloads, not enough time for clients and scarce resources for adequate services can make it hard for activation workers to provide personalised services and to work according to professional standards (Hasenfeld, 2010). Moreover, strategies of performance management may increase administrative workload and induce a shift from professional responsibilities towards managerial accountability and, thus, induce "strategies where activation workers try to realise quick wins, by focusing their time and resources on people that are considered as easy to reintegrate in the labour market" (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012, p. 502). In sum, contextual factors such as organisational conditions and management models "may put professional activation work under pressure and may elicit administrative coping strategies among activation workers" (p. 502). Furthermore, "activation work" may also not even be understood or conceptualised as a professional activity or as "social work". In fact, the educational and occupational background of front-

line workers in activation services varies across different country contexts and different local welfare agencies and public employment services. In some contexts, frontline workers are used to being benefit administrators, in other contexts they are used to being social workers or they belonged to other occupational groups, very often without clear professional profiles or trained in special in-house trainings.

A second approach in the literature speaks of activation work as a "new" profession (van der Berkel and van der Aa, 2012). This strand of literature points out that activation workers are, on the one hand, increasingly expected to act in a professional way, but that, on the other, the development of activation work as a new profession is both substantially as well as institutionally still in its infancy. Following Freidson's approach (2001) to professionalism as a logic of organising work where professionals autonomously control their own work, this approach argues in favour of strengthening the professional status of activation workers by taking the route of a traditional model of professionalisation. In this sense, Sainsbury (2008) argues that activation work should be established "as a profession, with accredited training and qualifications, a code of conduct and registration with a regulatory body responsible for maintaining professional standards" (p. 336). Similarly, other authors speak about activation workers as pre-professionals (Jorgensen et al., 2010) or, as previously mentioned, professionals without profession (van Berkel et al., 2010). Van Berkel et al. (2010) underline the missing professional status of activation work and point out its lacking characteristics of an established profession such as an offcially-recognised body of knowledge, an organised professional community and a system of professional accountability. But they also point out that it is not a coincidence that the professionalisation of frontline work is not considered within an approach which focuses mainly on the management of discretion, "as professionalism is often seen as a part of the problem of, rather than the solution for, the management of discretion" (p. 491). They argue instead for a better recognition of activation work and underline the importance of a professionalisation project in this field, as activation work turns out to be a rather individual project also for frontline workers and as clients risk being at the mercy of activation workers and practices which are unpredictable and of lacking transparency. Furthermore, van Berkel and van er Aa (2012) demonstrate the importance of activation

work also in relation to the effectiveness of activation and point out that a professional design of activation work could have positive impacts “in terms of the attitude of workers towards clients, in terms of personalised attention, in terms of the process of matching clients with services, in terms of dealing with sanctions, and in terms of contacts with employers” (p. 505). But, at the same time, they also find that a debate on the professionalisation of activation work has just started and that the feasibility of professionalisation processes in this field is highly contested. According to them, individualised, personalised and tailor-made service provision is the key to successful activation services and, thus, they make a strong appeal for the professionalisation of activation work but, as they point out,

> this may remain a rather gratuitous appeal when policy makers and managers do not invest in developing this profession and in facilitating the conditions for professional work, and when the nature of activation work and the activation profession do not acquire a more prominent place on the research agenda of social policy scholars. (p. 507)

2.6 Which Professionalism for “Activation Work” as a Practice of Citizenship?

The importance given to activation work and the plea for as well as the different ideas about its professionalisation, raise further questions on the very nature of the street-level delivery of activation policies and on different ideas of professionalism that might be more or less suitable for professionalisation strategies in this field. Authors who use traditional social work as the point of reference are often, at the best, rather skeptical about the possibilities of a professionalisation project in activation work, if not excluding it completely (Hasenfeld, 1999, 2000, 2010; McDonald & Marston, 2006; Raeymackers & Dierckx, 2013). Other authors, however, “come to a different conclusion and argue in favour of a further development and institutionalisation of the activation profession” (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012, p. 506). But how should such an activation profession look like? And which conceptions of professionalism inform the perspectives arguing for the institutionalisation of an

activation profession? Van Berkel and van der Aa (2012) indicate cause for concern; "apart from the issue whether activation work *can* be designed as a profession, the nature of the profession *itself* is still unclear and in need of being elaborated" (pp. 506f).

These questions can hardly be addressed abstracting from contextual factors, and the idea of a "new" activation profession might not really hit the mark or even follow a model of professionalisation which is less suitable for the ambivalent field of activation. The argument of establishing a more specialised profile of activation work is both understandable and legitimate. At the same time, it seems that its proponents are less aware about the limits a classical idea of expertocratic professionalism cannot but encounter in all fields in which service provision is closely linked to the ways criteria for social solidarity and welfare are defined and in which every professional activity is, eventually, inevitably linked to the definition of rights and duties as concretion of social citizenship.

In this sense, the argument here is that the social work profession and its struggles with the notion of professionalism might very well serve as a referential model for dealing with the difficulties and challenges of activation work and for pursuing a professionalisation strategy in this highly ambiguous domain. In fact, as the history of social work clearly shows, the professionalisation of social work always had to deal with tensions and ambiguities which made it particularly difficult for social work to develop an unambiguous and universally-transferable identity. These difficulties have often been interpreted as a lack of professionalism and the history of social work has seen different attempts to overcome these difficulties by emphasising value neutrality and scientific detachment and by tracing out a clearer demarcation both with other professions and with other non-professional activities (Lorenz, 2001, 2006). But as Lorenz clearly points out, exactly these difficulties and the openness of social work qualifies it as a social profession "that has always yet to be defined in the exact circumstances in which it is being practised. Perhaps it is appropriately ambiguous because the 'social' is always the space in which ambiguities emerge, get negotiated, give rise to a dominant discourse only to get subverted again. The 'social' is the space that social work always had to negotiate, no matter how much it wanted to get away from this dangerous and insecure intersection of contrary forces and from

the firing line of public criticism. But there is no secure place for a profession that has 'the social' as its mandate" (Lorenz, 2001, p. 12). Social work has its domain of intervention where the public and the private meet and interact and where social bonds have to be negotiated. As a social profession, social work is rooted in, and committed to, both the private and the public sphere and this field of tension between the private and the political constitutes an essential characteristic of social work and part of every frontline social work experience. This means that social work "has to negotiate between a political perspective on welfare which relates its activities ultimately to the state, and one which regards welfare primarily as the concern of private individuals" (Lorenz, 2001, p. 13). It is in these processes that the commitment to both the private and the political has to be substantiated and that the social as the core mode of operating in social work has to be demonstrated. Exactly therein also lies the political nature of social work. As Lorenz (2006) points out,

> the political nature of social work practice is borne out not so much in political campaigning …, but in giving direct, personal interactions with service users a "citizenship dimension" so that they become an element in the recreation of social solidarity as inter-locking networks of rights and obligations. (p. 174)

According to such an understanding, the professionalisation of social work cannot simply follow the path of carving out a detached area of proper competence but has do develop a notion of professionalism that engages with policy ideas, organisational structures and practices which determine the constraints and possibilities for a practice of citizenship.

In this sense, the ongoing debate on social work's professional identity is not only an academic extravagance or an auto-referential end in itself. Rather, it is a necessary debate that must go along with the search of contingent and contextualised answers and, thus, promote a reflexive practice which is aware about its impacts, its dilemmas and its limits and tries to face, to shape and to negotiate them (Fargion, 2009). In fact, in social work there is a broad body of literature which picks up on the idea of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1984) and which discusses different concepts of reflection, critical reflection and reflexivity in relation to social work practice (Sheppard, 1998; White, 1997; Taylor & White, 2001, 2006; Kessl, 2009; Sicora, 2005, 2017).

For an overview on the existing literature and approaches see also White et al. (2006) and D'Cruz et al. (2007). Without going into detail on this debate, it is clear from Fook and Askeland (2006) that critical reflection has the specific purpose "to expose or unsettle dominant assumptions with the expressed purpose of challenging and changing dominant power relations" (p. 47). Fook and Askeland develop their approach to critical reflection based on notions from critical theory and from Foucauldian theorising regarding power providing a framework for the

> analysis of how people make (and remake) themselves in relation to social context and structure. And how they gain a sense of personal power or agency in this process. In this sense, … the aim of critical reflection, or what makes the reflection critical, is the allowing of more control and choice in individual lives through the exposure of dominant social assumptions (which had partly maintained their power through their hidden operation). (p. 53)

Other authors use the concept of reflexivity to highlight the importance of critical self-reflection on the impact of own positions, backgrounds, assumptions, feelings and behaviour while attending at the same time to the impact of the wider ideological, discursive political and organisational context (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Finlay & Gough, 2003). In this sense, what is proposed for social work is the idea of a reflexive professionalisation (Dewe, 2009; Otto et al., 2009; Dewe & Otto, 2012) which means that social workers, in addition to their own knowledge and methodical tools, have to keep in mind social norms, social conflicts and social problems that are mirrored in practice by every concrete single "case". Such an understanding of professionalism is open to different forms of knowledge and to a democratic rationale, which seems important for a professional activity which

> derives its mandate always from being based and linked in the way in which society, not a group of experts, collectively defines, often in a most contradictory way, criteria of well-being, social integration, social solidarity and hence the conditions under which society can only exist. (Lorenz, 2006, p. 11)

Otto and Ziegler (2006) point to the importance of reflexive professionalism both for realising the democratic potential of social work practice and, thus, for its own legitimacy as well as for contrasting the replacement of professionalism by practices and technologies which refer merely to the functionings of clients and service users in an apolitical way. This understanding of professionalism comes close to ideas and concepts coined, such as civic professionalism (Sullivan, 2004), activist professionalism (Sachs, 2000) or democratic professionalism (Dzur, 2004; Kremer & Tonkens, 2006; Tonkens et al., 2013), which "imply varying efforts to articulate and promote a further democratisation of the relationship between professionals and service users" (Tonkens & Newmann, 2011, p. 206). All these concepts try to adapt the notion of professionalism, linking it up "with the demand for the democratisation of service delivery and the criticism of professionalism while still preserving the core characteristic of representing public values" (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010, p. 53). In this sense, they share the Freidsonian approach to professionalism as different both from bureaucracy and from the market in its commitment to the public good while acknowledging at the same time that knowledge and skills are not owned exclusively by professionals. Knowledge and skills rather

> become the object of a democratic dialogue. Democracy itself becomes a value to be promoted by professionals. This means that the development, the maintenance and the exchange of knowledge remain at the heart of professional activities, but their application has to be the result of processes of democratic exchange in order to enhance the openness and the accountability of professional practice. (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010, p. 54)

The suggestion here is that the debate on the professionalisation of activation work should be probably be skeptical about conceptualsing activation too hastily as a "new" profession. Rather it could be informed by a critical stance and a critical debate on professionalism under changing socio-political circumstances as is developed not least in the social work literature. Kessl (2009) connects the idea of critical reflexivity in social work with the new (or post-) welfare agenda, which focuses on the subject "in a new way as a single, responsible, individual unit (the client) or collective entity (the family

or the community)" (p. 310). Relying strongly on behavioural concepts and pedagogical terms, this agenda is intended to activate "all the reproductive potential available to the 'subjects' regardless of their degree of social participation" (p. 310). Against this background, Kessl invites us to look at how social work practice reproduces given political rationalities and which strategies undermine or open spaces of action both for professionals and service users. As he states,

> the theoretical and empirical answers to these questions can show the boundaries of the existing, the construction plan of each (delivery) situation. Critical reflexive social work, with a tradition of being sensitive to these boundaries and with the capacity of enlarging and undermining them with a view to opening up spaces of action for users, would be the best professional, reflexive agency imaginable. (p. 315)

Applying such an understanding to "activation work" has to look both at the conditions of street-level practice and the orientations of practitioners, which contribute or inhibit a participatory dimension of practice in which the public and the private can be related to each other by overcoming a strict active/passive divide and by seeing unemployed and welfare-claiming people not only as silent or passive objects but still as citizens who can make their voice heard and as "active agents, capable of exercising power and affecting their own welfare and well-being" (Johansson & Hvinden, 2013, p. 48). As Matthies (2009) points out,

> welfare service professionals can both enable and hinder participation of marginalised citizens. They can strengthen the identity of active citizenship and enable collective action, mutual networks and self-organisation among service users. But social workers can be instrumentalised for useless programmes of activation in the name of the integration of marginalised people. Some projects allow only limited, harmless types of preplanned participation, and professionals can in any case discourage people with repressive interventions or with accounts of citizens' disinterest or incompetence. (pp. 330f)

Applying the concepts of subject and subjectivisation as treated by Adorno, Matthies (2009) points out that social workers are fighting with a constant dilemma between objectivisation and subjectivistion and that they are always exposed to the risk of neglecting the contradictions that exist between "the real" and "the possible" and of working towards manipulation instead of subjectivisation. If welfare professionals are oriented towards enabling people to become the subjects of their lives, this means also that

> those societal and institutional mechanisms that entail hidden or open forms of pressure and hinder a free process of becoming a subject have to be identified. Subjects have to be able to identify and deal with the basic contradictions in their environment in order to process changes in these. Social work must aim to support full citizenship of individuals, who are able to resist manipulative influences. (p. 323)

Matthies (2009) points out that subjectivisation must not be seen only as an idealistic goal but that it is an indispensable pre-condition for the effectiveness of social work, which can reach its clients only on the basis of participatory and subject-directed approaches and which requires a dialogue between professionals and service users to open up perspectives for what is possible, especially in situations that appear closed and hopeless. In this sense, Matthies stresses that "the subjectivisation of citizens is not only their right or an indicator for progressive professionalism, but even a necessary pre-condition for a more just welfare policy." (p. 319). She argues that the knowledge of social workers and other street-level professionals has not been systematically used for the development of policies. This could be, however, a promising perspective for the further professional development not only for social work in a very strict sense, but for all professional activities at the frontline of welfare services and, thus, also for activation work.

> Bringing in street level knowledge as the result of a dialectic and democratic dialogue between those who implement social policy strategies and the respective target groups of service users could become an promising strategy to overcome a reductionist, managerial and instrumental "what works" agenda

> and to develop more effective, more accurate and probably more just social policies. (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010, p. 56)

The interesting point in looking at frontline work in activation services and in exploring the possibilities of its professionalisation is, thus, to look at constraints and possibilities for activation work as a practice of citizenship. In their work on social professionals' perceptions of activating citizenship, Sirotkina and van Ewijk (2010) point out that social workers are committed to the idea of activation, but also to promoting participation and supporting citizens. Social workers agree on what Sirotkina and van Ewijk label as personalised citizenship.

> Personalised citizenship implies that citizenship is not a fixed standard to discriminate between full citizens and socially, physically or mentally handicapped citizens. Responsibility, rights and duties are universal but different in different contexts, different for different people. The idea of self responsibility and social responsibility does not imply that for certain citizens and in certain contexts professional support is excluded; on the contrary, social support creates a more equal level playing field and supports the most vulnerable people, neighbourhoods, counties, groups to participate to their own capabilities. (Sirotkina and van Ewijk, 2010, p. 88)

Duffy (2010) advocates for an inclusive model of citizenship which should underpin the meaning of personalisation for social workers. According to Duffy, personalisation in service provision has to be understood first and foremost as sustaining and strengthening people in their citizenship. This means giving people the chance to be treated as citizens who have an equal right to get the level of support needed to effectively achieve citizenship. In this sense, personalisation cannot only be understood as something laid down in a series of externally-defined policies which come down to practice as rules for equal distribution or equal treatment of people. Rather, personalisation has to be understood as intimately bound up with the nature of social work practice that critically embraces technologies and indeed finds ways to make them work and to improve them against the background of an under-

standing of citizenship not only as a status, but also as a practice and, eventually, as a matter of social justice.

Newman and Tonkens (2011) look on participation, responsibility and choice as key policy framings of active citizenship, summoning citizens to take on new roles in the context of new welfare policies. They examine what happens when struggles from below meet new governmental discourses in the context of welfare services reform and suggest different ways for policies, enactments and meanings of active citizenship to interact in specific sites. This perspective particularly takes account of different meanings and practices of active citizenship pointing out shifting responsibilities, identifications and experiences, not at least in the transformations between professionals and service users. Tonkens and Newman (2011) point out that the notion of active citizenship challenges a traditional understanding of professionals and has "repercussions for what it means to be a service professional" (p. 201). The notion of active citizenship took shape also against a background of growing scepticism and critique of professional power and and of promotion of the idea that the power of citizens, also as service users, should be enhanced. However, as Tonkens and Newman (2011) state, there are many positions which express "scepticism about the empowerment of citizens under the banner of active citizenship: rather than a real shift in the relationship between citizens and professionals, active citizenship is charged with giving shelter to new forms of manipulation, control and boxing in" (p. 202). In this sense, Tonkens and Newman argue that the claim for a shift towards greater centrality of service users and less power for professionals is way too simple.

> Power between citizens and professionals is not like a ball that can be passed over from one to the other: authority and expertise are not handed over but have multiplied and at the same time they have become more conditional. Moreover, there are crucial variations in the conditionality and multiplication of that authority and expertise. (p. 203)

Against this background, Tonkens and Newman discern a regime of the professional-user relationship Tonkens and Newman based on reflexive cooperation. This regime comes close to ideas of democratic professionalism outlined above, as it "maintains that professionals and citizens occupy different

positions, while simultaneously stressing the need to renew and particularly democratise the relations between professionals and citizens" (pp. 206f) and "retains the orthodox values of professionalism such as expertise, autonomy and altruism, but … politicises the practices in which professionals striving for these values are involved" (p. 207). This understanding of professionalism as reflexive cooperation offers a re-framing of the knowledge-power knot by recognising the expertise and agency of both professionals and services users and by critically addressing issues of power and authority in frontline encounters and professional-user relationships. Tonkens and Newman highlight that the regime of reflexive cooperation overcomes the binary relationship between professionals as agents of the state and users as more or less active citizens by recognising also professionals as citizens. They argue,

> "frontline" workers have themselves to be considered as citizens. They have to judge how to act in areas of ambiguity and use both their professional ethos and their political values in making such judgements …. They sometimes silently subvert policy subscriptions, using their discretion to "translate" policies to suit local contexts or to privilege particular goals. They may also use the spaces of agency to assert the values of care against … managerial logics. (pp. 210f)

In this view, frontline workers themselves are citizens who possess agency—and counter-agency (Prior, 2009)—that they can use in order to develop strategies of revision, resistance and refusal when they are faced with the implementation of policies whose effects they consider as harmful or iniquitous. Tonkens and Newman (2011) emphasise

> that we need to pay attention to professional workers as both active and activist citizens and take seriously their responsibilities as the carriers of public values. They are confronted with new ethical and moral choices concerning their dedication to serve service users and/or the public good; to weigh conflicting demands of efficiency, cost-containment and maximising their "production" against the demands to serve the public good. (p. 213)

Part Two

3. On The Frontline of Activation Services – Exploring and Comparing Practice Representations and Possibilities for (Professional) Action

3.1 The Research Context

This second part presents the findings of a research project undertaken on the frontline of public employment services in the city of Vienna in Austria and in the city of Milan in Italy. Before addressing the research design and the respective methodological considerations, the following paragraphs give a brief overview on active labour market policies both in Austria and in Italy and on the situation of public employment services in the two cities of Vienna and Milan.

3.1.1 Active labour market policies in Austria

Austria is a country with a strong tradition in the promotion of vocational training and, in this sense, with a tradition of applying tools of active policy long before the activation turn (Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004). In fact, the history of active labour market policy in Austria is officially depicted as dating back to 1959, when first concepts of guidance and training measures aimed to reduce seasonal unemployment and to create new jobs were developed (BMASK, 2013a). During the 1960s, not least against the background of growing demands of the Austrian Trade Union Federation ÖGB and of the 1964 OECD recommendations and the 1964/1965 OECD inspection report, a stronger emphasis and a reconsideration of labour market policy as an important policy area both for economic development and social protection was established. In 1968, the *Arbeitsmarkförderungsgesetz* (Labour Market Promotion Act) was approved by the Austrian Parliament to become law in 1969. It redirected Austrian labour market policy to reduce unemployment and to follow a full employment policy based on the logic of active measures. Furthermore, it addressed the governance structure of Austria's public employment services. The PES remained under direct ministerial jurisdiction, but the collaboration with the social partners at all governance levels was ac-

tively solicited and institutionalised by the government. This commitment to full employment policy could be held up during the following Kreisky era (1970–1983), an era of general expansion of the welfare state in Austria. During this period, the government was able to keep unemployment consistently low and to achieve exceptional employment records in Europe. However, this strong performance was rather due to Keynesian economic policies, the monetary policy which pegged the Austrian Schilling to the German Mark, moderate wage settlements, the growing tertiary sector and the introduction of the 40-hour working week than to active measures, even though investments in these measures, such as the support in regional mobility, spending on apprenticeships, public employment projects and measures for disabled workers, had significantly increased during the 1970s (Weishaupt, 2010a). With respect to female employment, Austria introduced individual taxation, extended maternal leave schemes, equalised financial transfers to families and tried to combat the discrimination of women on the labour market, but it maintained its conservative path of not expanding welfare services for child and elderly care and of not seriously questioning the traditional male breadwinner model (Tálos, 2005; Weishaupt, 2010a; Stelzer-Orthofer, 2011).

From the early 1980s, Austria had to face new challenges of rising unemployment and of the ailing state-led industrial sector. Against this background, an amendment of the *Arbeitsmarkförderungsgesetz* (Labour Market Promotion Act) introduced a so-called "experimental clause" for the use of new labour market policy instruments and laid the foundation for a turn towards stronger active labour market policies, initially targeted at specific "problem" groups, such as young and long-term unemployed people. However, despite the application of these new instruments, the use of active labour market policies was still rather modest throughout the 1980s and the overall Austria labour market policy continued to rely strongly on the male breadwinner model and to even expand early exit schemes such as early retirement and disability pensions (Tálos, 2005; Weishaupt, 2010a; Stelzer-Orthofer, 2011).

The strong turn towards activation in Austria, however, took place from the mid 1990s, against the background of again-rising unemployment, fiscal consolidation efforts, inter- and supranational influences, but also against the background of a changing political climate and the anti-welfare

debate initiated by the right-wing populist FPÖ. The development in Austrian labour market policy since the 1990s was characterised both by activation and restriction (Artner, 2001). While the development of the income maintenance and unemployment benefit schemes in former periods had been rather ambivalent, seeing both expansions and cutbacks over time, since 1993 a more restrictive regime of benefits has persistently been introduced (Tálos, 2005). These restrictions concerned general cutbacks of benefits through new methods of calculation, stricter access to benefits and, first and foremost, their increased conditionality depending on the individual initiative and effort to re-enter employment. Especially under the first "black-blue" coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ, the political discourse stressed the non-tolerance of and the fight against the unwillingness to work (Obinger & Tálos, 2006; Atzmüller, 2009a; Stelzer-Orthofer, 2011). Accordingly, reasonability regulations were further tightened and the systems of sanctions was expanded and implemented more severely (Atzmüller, 2009a). Although in 2008 a further tightening of the reasonability regulations took place, the governments of the big coalition of SPÖ and ÖVP introduced some selective improvements of benefits and reformed the national social assistance scheme. Generally, it can be stated that, from the 1990s, the Austrian system of unemployment benefits has shifted, similarly to other countries, from the notion of income maintenance to a stricter regime of benefits oriented towards a conditional minimum income protection matched by increased activation measures. (Obinger & Tálos, 2006; Obinger, 2009; Weishaupt, 2010; Stelzer-Orthofer, 2011, 2015)[26].

26 Claims for unemployment benefits can be made by those who have paid unemployment insurance benefits for an appropriate period. In order to receive benefits, a person has to register in any case as actively seeking work with the AMS and as being able and willing to work. The rate of unemployment benefit *(Arbeitslosengeld)* is calculated on the basis of the previous net income rate, usually being equal to 55% of this former net income. It can be, however, increased with family supplements or in accordance with the so-called standard supplementary benefit rate (*Ausgleichszulagenrichtsatz*) stipulated in the General Social Security Law (*Allgemeines Sozialversicherungsgesetz*). The duration of unemployment benefit payments range from 30 to a maximum of 52 weeks depending on age and employment history. After the expiry of entitlement to unemployment benefit, jobseekers can apply for means-tested unemployment assistance (*Notstandshilfe*) which combines the principles of social insurance and welfare. While unemployment assistance payments are lower than previous unemployment benefits, unemployment assistance can be paid for 52 weeks and may be also extended by application, provided that the qualifying conditions are fulfilled. However, the tightening of suitability criteria and the increased use of sanctions make an excessive use of unemployment assistance payments rather unlikely. Also social assistance recipients (people who are not entitled to unemployment benefit and assistance

With respect to active labour market measures, the most important reform was introduced in 1994 with the *Arbeitsmarktservicegesetz* (Public Employment Service Act), providing a new legal framework regarding both the normative and the organisational dimension of active labour market policies in Austria. With the Public Employment Service Act, the public employment service was formally separated from the Ministry and a semi-autonomous, tripartite Public Employment Service Agency (Arbeitsmarktservice – AMS) with its own legal status as public-law service enterprise (*Dienstleistungsunternehmen öffentlichen Rechts*), its own corporate identity and management autonomy was established. This reform marked an increase in the relevance of activation strategies and early intervention by means of active measures to achieve the quick and sustainable integration of job-seekers in non-subsidised employment (Artner, 2001; Weishaupt, 2009; Stelzer-Orthofer, 2011). Within this context, the establishment of the AMS aimed at transforming the public employment service from a mere employment office into a comprehensive service provider pursuing, in particular, the goals of abandoning the state monopoly in job placement, of decentralising decision making processes and of increasing both the flexibility in regional deployments of resources and the better involvement of the social partners (BMASK, 2013a, 2013b). This transformation was marked also by the introduction of new public management strategies with a strong emphasis on management by objectives. (Atzmüller, 2009a; Weishaupt, 2010a; Woltran, 2011; Stelzer-Orthofer, 2011). Furthermore, the cooperation between the Public Employment Service and local welfare offices has increased substantially. Although Austria has not seen a real merger of services by establishing one-stop offices (like, for instance, in Germany), social assistance recipients deemed as capable of working have to register at the nearest local PES office and are exposed to the same activation measures as any other job-seekers. Their performance and compliance is reported to local welfare offices, which decide on the possible curtailing of social assis-

and who apply for the means-tested minimum income paid by local welfare agencies) who are capable of work have to register as actively seeking work with the AMS.
Under the new ÖVP-FPÖ government coalition in charge since December 2017, the reform of the unemployment benefit scheme (foreseeing the abolition of unemployment assistance) has been one of the first topics addressed (in the media) by the new Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection.

tance, the so-called means-tested minimum income (*Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung*). (Weishaupt, 2010a).[27]

Generally, with the establishment of the AMS and the stronger emphasis on active policies, Austria has clearly oriented its labour market policies towards the activation paradigm, giving priority to active measures over passive benefit payments. However, this shift is interpreted differently in the literature. Some authors point out that in the Austrian context, activation has, at least initially, mainly been interpreted as tightening the benefits regime and increasing the pressure on unemployed people for quick labour market integration rather than as sustainable capability promotion through training and qualification measures (Buxbaum et al., 2008; Woltran, 2011). Furthermore, some authors have criticised the quality of and the point in certain training and qualification measures (Atzmüller 2009a; Leibetseder & Kranewitter, 2012).[28] However, while Austria traditionally spent little resources on active labour market policies, since 2000 expenditure on active policies has notably increased. Taking into consideration its low unemployment rate,[29] Austria is even positioned well above the European average of expenditures in active labour market policies (BMASK, 2013b). Although current budgetary constraints might compromise the future expenditure on active labour market policies (Woltran, 2011), Austria's response to the economic crisis since 2008 has seen strong investment in active measures (together with the expansion of short-time work schemes) (OECD, 2009b; Weishaupt, 2010a). As Obinger (2015) shows, comparing international macro-data, Austria has been investing strongly in active labour market policies (but less in additional services) and performed well in combatting employment, especially youth unemployment, also during the years of economic and financial crisis.

Austria combines characteristics associated with different activation models and regimes, showing the ambiguities and the double-faced nature

27 Since January 1st 2017, there is no more single regulation of the minimum income scheme on the federal level. Since then, eligibility criteria for social assistance have been changed on the level of the *Bundesländer*.
For a critical analysis of Austria's social assistance policy see Leibetseder (2014). Altreiter and Leibetseder (2015), Leibetseder et al. (2015), Globisch and Madlung (2017), in comparative perspective, Leibetseder et al. (2017).

28 For the long-term effects of qualification measures see BMASK (2013c).

29 Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate on January 31st 2018: 5,3% (EUROSTAT)

of activation very well. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis on a responsibility-based understanding of unemployment and on bringing benefit recipients back into the labour market as soon as possible (Atzmüller, 2009a). On the other hand, Austria has seen a strong investment in the public employment service and a notable expansion of active measures for training and qualification (BMASK, 2013b). Although Austria is not a typical example of a flexicurity regime (like, for instance, Denmark), it has been able, better than other continental countries, to face employment-related challenges and to combine labour market flexibility with social security, not least through innovative partnerships between the PES and private actors (Weishaupt, 2009). In this sense, Austria is often depicted as an interesting model especially among (and for other) continental countries (Weishaupt, 2009; Obinger et al., 2010; Obinger, 2015). What is particularly interesting in the context of this study is the strong contractualistic trait of activation policies in Austria. Interventions place emphasis on individual responsibility, but this orientation is matched by individualised service provision and by the crucial role of employment service practitioners who have to stipulate the contractual agreements with individual job-seekers and benefit recipients.

3.1.2 Active labour market policies in Italy

Traditionally, Italian labour market policies have been characterised by a strong guarantist approach combining the traditional unemployment insurance scheme with a strong focus on job protection and on special, strongly category-based measures of in-work protection intended to avoid dismissals and, thus, to prevent unemployment. This traditional pattern of Italian labour market policies developed from the postwar period until the early 1970s, in the context of the growing industrialisation mainly in the north of the country and due to the strong position trade unions and their political achievements (hitting their peak with the enactment of the *Statuto dei Lavoratori* (Statute of Employees) in 1970 (*L. n. 300/1970*). However, the configuration of Italian labour market policies was strongly category-based and, hence, very selective from the very outset (Sacchi & Vesan, 2011, 2015; Vesan, 2012; Calza Bini & Lucciarini, 2013).

This became increasingly problematic from the early 1980s, against the background of adverse macroeconomic conditions and in view of the changing structure of the labour market with a strong increase of the service sector and, thus, of employment beyond the traditional category of industrial workers. The reaction to these new challenges in Italy's labour market policy consisted, however, on the one hand, in the extension of in-work protection (or the introduction of a special mobility benefit in case of collective dismissals) and in the creation of early exit possibilities.[30] On the other hand, since the 1990s, main labour market reforms have been strongly oriented towards the liberalisation and flexibilisation of the labour market increasingly considered as being too rigid. These attempts responded to the growing pressure due not only to the worsening of the economic situation during the early 1990s and the changing employment structure, but also to the Maastricht criteria for entry into European Monetary Union. In this context, the first very incisive labour market reform was introduced with the so-called *Treu Package* (named after the Labour Minister Tiziano Treu) in 1997 (*L. n. 196/1997).* This reform aimed at increasing both the employment rate and overall labour market flexibility through reforms at its "margins", i.e. through the introduction of atypical contracts, in particular, temporary agency work. At the same time, further legislative measures (*D. Lgs. 469/1997*) introduced both a stronger emphasis on and the devolution of active labour market policies and also abolished the public monopoly on the supply of unemployment services (in response

30 As early as 1968, the ordinary short-term work scheme (*cassa integrazione guadagni – CIG*) introduced in 1947 and applicable for firms with more than 15 employees in the industrial, agricultural and construction sector, was extended, with the introduction of an extraordinary short-term work scheme (*cassa integrazione guadagni straordinaria – CIGS*). Additionally, in 1991, another special measure, the so-called mobility benefit (indennità di mobilità), was introduced. It is paid to workers in case of collective dismissal (but always restricted to the above-mentioned firms with more than 15 employees). This mobility benefit is more generous than the regular unemployment benefit and is intended to be combined with services and training measures in order to facilitate a quick transition into a new job. However, the introduction of the mobility benefit signals a new approach, i.e. the protection of the worker outside the contract in contrast to the protection of the job itself (as it is the case fort the CIG and the CIGS).
Early exit possibilities were created in 1981 with the statute law on early retirement (*L. n. 155/1981*). In response to the most recent economic crisis, the legislator arranged for both the mobility and the short time work schemes to be applied also in an exceptional way (ammortizzatori sociali in deroga) in order to close the gaps not covered by the strongly-category-based nature of the schemes. This shows clearly how the Italian benefit system has always been strongly oriented towards protecting against unemployment (and hence towards in-work protection) and how reforms of the benefit system tried to maintain this orientation by increasingly extending short-term work and mobility schemes.

to the decision of the European Court of Justice ("Job Centre 2")). With this new legal framework, the responsibilities in matters of active labour market policy were transferred to lower levels, attributing to the Regions the legislative authority, whereas the management of public employment services was handed to the Provinces (the next lower level in the Public Administration).[31] This reform was also intended to change the role of the public employment services (as reflected also by their changing denomination from *Uffici di collocamento* (placement offices) to *Centri per l'impiego* (centres for employment) from the bureaucratic fulfillment of managing job placement lists to service centres providing a variety of services ranging from placement to training and counselling services. The second main labour market reform came with the *Biagi Law* in 2003 (named after labour lawyer Marco Biagi) (*L. n. 30/2003* and *D. Lgs. n. 276/2003*). This reform further deregulated the use of atypical work arrangements, such as part-time work and temporary agency work, and introduced new forms of atypical contracts such as project work, on-call jobs and job sharing. With regard to the provision of private employment services, the Biagi reform introduced the possibility for the merging of private employment service provision and temporary work placement in private agencies (the so-called *Agenzie per il lavoro*) (Sacchi & Vesan, 2011, 2015; Vesan, 2012; Calza Bini & Lucciarini, 2013).

However, the main impact of these reforms consisted of the flexibilisation of the labour market and the introduction of new forms of atypical work increasingly used (and misused) by employers to substitute traditional employment contracts (Borzaga, 2012). It is important to underline that this strong flexibilisation of the labour market and the proliferation of atypical work arrangements was (at least until recently) not equally matched by the provision of social protection schemes for atypical workers or by the investment in public employment services, which continued to be not very effective (and to have a bad reputation both among job seekers and employers) and which were often hardly linked neither with the local offices of the national social security institute (INPS) nor with local welfare agencies (being, thus, far from a model of integrated service provision or one-stop shops).[32]

31 This process of decentralisation was supported and even extended with the Constitutional Reform in 2001.

32 This was also due to the fact that, until very recently, Italy had no minimum

Furthermore, the decentralisation process has led to different regional (and even provincial) approaches and to a highly fragmented system of active labour market policies which additionally contributed to the general situation of high regional differences and disparities in the concrete welfare configurations (Ambra et al., 2013; Kazepov & Barberis, 2013; Ascoli, 2011; Ranci, 2005).

In their analysis of Italian labour market reform attempts since the mid-1990s, Sacchi and Vesan (2011) find a gradual re-orientation towards a more proactive design of labour market policies through a stronger emphasis on the conditionality of benefits, the confinement of early exit options, and, at least initially, a slight relocation of resources from passive to active measures. However, Sacchi and Vesan also show the difficulties in the implementation of these general policy goals, first of all in relation to the stronger conditionality of benefits, as well as the strong discontinuities in the investment in active measures. Much stronger has been, in contrast, the main policy goal of labour market flexibilisation, and its far more consequent implementation (and misuse) have led to a strong increase in atypical work arrangements even though their success in raising the overall employment level is highly debatable (Sacchi & Vesan, 2011).

As to the system of benefits, special measures were increasingly contained, ordinary unemployment benefit was made more generous and its use was expanded over time, thus reducing, at least to some extent, the differences in the protection of categories of workers. However, with the strong increase of atypical contracts, the number of workers without any protection

income scheme on the national level. After the experimentation of a first national scheme between 1999 and 2001 in different municipalities, the proposal was dismissed and no further attempts were made on the national level, despite respective recommendation from the EU. Some Regions as well as Autonomous Provinces have introduced minimum income schemes on the regional and provincial level (Gambardella et al., 2013; Madama, 2012; Madama et al., 2016. Since 2013, a strong civil-society-led initiative against poverty (*Alleanza contro la povertà in Italia*) has been making a strong plea and proposal for the introduction of a national minimum income scheme. In 2016, a first pilot measure (*sostegno per l'inclusione attiva – SIA*), first tested in the biggest cities of the country, was extended to the whole national territory. In 2017, a new national minimum income scheme (*reddito di inclusione – REI*) was finally adopted (Gori, 2017; Vincieri, 2017). As of January 1st 2018 the new scheme has come to effect (replacing both the pilot measure SIA, and unemployment assistance, ASDI). As Gori points out, "its establishment is to be appraised from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, it is a historic achievement for a country where the introduction of a national safety net has been advocated for decades. On the other hand, the current funding constraints make it still categorical with respect to coverage and inadequate with respect to both the level of cash benefits and the provision of services in kind." (Gori, 2017, p. 509).

grew substantially and broad segments of the Italian workforce continue to be without any protection in case of unemployment (Berton et al., 2009). Furthermore, as a response to the economic and employment crisis, since 2008 there has again been a stronger and even exceptional use of short-term work schemes and mobility benefits (Sacchi & Vesan, 2011; Calza Bini & Lucciarini, 2013).

In relation to the organisational dimension, Sacchi and Vesan confirm the different approaches to active labour market policies on the regional level, which lead to difficult processes of governance and different institutional solutions for the provision of employment services on the provincial level. A critical aspect in this context is the lacking integration of public employment services in the broader context of an integrated welfare system on the local level (Catalano et al., 2015). Regarding the performance of public employment services, Sacchi and Vesan outline the difficulties in the provision of individualised services, especially in the southern regions, which are due to their inadequate infrastructure, the prevailing of obsolete and inconsistent bureaucratic practices and, not least, by the basic design of these services, which are relevant to an ideal overall labour market situation, which is often far away from the actual conditions (Sacchi & Vesan, 2011).[33]

In a nutshell, it can be stated that Italian labour market policies have long been characterised, first of all, by a strong dualism between insiders and outsiders, with protected categories of "typical" workers on the one hand, and non-protected and highly precarious "atypical" workers on the other one. The flexibilisation of the labour market during the last few decades has been accompanied only by weak investment in active labour market policies and marginal support services. Furthermore, regionally-different approaches and regulative frameworks (against the background of the strong economic north-south divide of the country) led to very different situations, and, indeed, different ALMP policy regimes, which can vary from region to region (and even from province to province).

Against this background of a deregulated labour market with a high share of atypical work arrangements without any access to unemployment protection and of weak active labour market policies, Italy has been hit by the

33 For a critical analysis of the performance of public employment services in Italy see Donini (2017), in comparative perspective see Larsen and Vesan (2012).

economic and financial crisis since 2008. The severe consequences of the crisis in terms of an economic downturn and a steep rise of the unemployment rate[34], especially among young people have additionally worsened the situation in the Italian labour market. In this context, the technical government led by Prime Minister Monti launched a labour market reform, the so-called Fornero Reform (named after the former Labour Minister) from 2012 (*L. n. 92/2012*), which pursued two main policy goals. On the one hand, the reform efforts were intended to limit the misuse of atypical contracts and to promote stable work arrangements. On the other hand, the reform tried to modify the unemployment benefits system through the introduction of a new type of benefit, the so-called ASPI (*Assicurazione sociale per l'impiego*). This new benefit was intended to create a universal social security cushion for all the unemployed which was supposed to be connected with stronger activation measures. In this sense, the new ASPI benefit was aimed at reducing the existing high number of different unemployment benefits by progressively substituting them (Cinelli, 2013; Bozzao, 2013; Giubboni, 2013).

In 2015, Italy undertook a further labour market reform, the so-called *Jobs Act* launched by the Renzi government. The main differences between the two reforms concern the issue of dismissals, while the new unemployment benefit (NASPI) is, similar to the benefit foreseen by the Fornero reform, intended to include also the unemployed who are working on atypical contracts and to be linked to stronger activation measures. As to active labour market policies, both reforms point, thus, in the same direction and the *Jobs Act* can be considered a follow up of the former reform (Sacchi & Vesan, 2015; Salomone, 2016).

With these reform efforts, Italy is catching up and trying to close the gap on European welfare systems by more coherent national strategies for the promotion and implementation of active labour market policies. However, implementation remains a very critical aspect and it is not fully clear yet how the reform attempts have changed practices of activation at the frontline of public employment services. Together with the introduction of the new minimum income scheme (*reddito di inclusione* – REI), which also links benefit receipt to individualised projects of active social and employment inclusion

34 Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate on January 31st 2018: 10,8 % (EUROSTAT).

and, in this context, foresees a strong collaboration between local welfare agencies and public employment services, Italy has laid the basis for a stronger turn towards activation and a better integration of its employment and social policies, at least at the level of formal policies (Sacchi & Vesan, 2015; Agostini & Natali, 2016; Salomone, 2016).

In a comparative perspective, Italy has to be, nonetheless, considered a latecomer in aligning its labour market and social policies towards the activation paradigm. Of course this is not only due to a delay in picking up new ideas about welfare state development, but it has also to do with Italy's welfare tradition and with its structural preconditions for the reorientation of its labour market and social policies. Italy, on the one hand, shared the difficulties of other continental countries in combining a more flexible labour market with supporting services and new social security provisions due to the continental tradition of strict job protection and generous insurance-based unemployment benefits for typical workers. Furthermore, Italy demonstrates the main characteristics of the Mediterranean welfare model with its heavy reliance on the familialistic production of welfare as well as poor and fragmented social services. However, a general characterisation of Italy is difficult and leads inevitably to blurring generalisations. For a precise analysis, it is more conducive to look at the different worlds or "geographies of activation" (Ambra et al., 2013) that can be found underneath the national level. Ambra et al. (2013) analyse models of activation policies in four different Italian regions, pointing out that their variation is due to both different modes of governance as well as regionally-different labour market situations (especially between the North and the South).

The region of Lombardy is characterised by a clear orientation towards activation and towards the marketisation of employment services. Lombardy has the advantage of being a wealthy region, not only compared to other Italian regions, particularly in the South, but also on a European scale. Accordingly, the advantageous labour market situation offers better preconditions for the definition and implementation of activation policies, as is the case in other regions. Furthermore, Lombardy is one of the Italian regions which has most profoundly changed its general welfare arrangements, giving justification to the definition in literature of the so-called "Lombardy welfare model" (Carabelli & Facchini, 2011). This model is strongly inspired both by

a neoliberal orientation towards marketisation and New Public Management approaches and by a consequent interpretation of the notion of subsidiarity, both vertically and horizontally. Vertical subsidiarity is, however, interpreted in the light of a strong centralism on the regional level and less recognised towards sub-regional entities, such as Provinces or municipalities. What is given strong emphasis is horizontal subsidiarity, implying the notion that the public sector should not provide services which citizens, families and private bodies (both non-for-profit and for-profit) can supply themselves. Accordingly, both the market and the private not-for-profit sector are strongly included in the welfare provision system, resulting in public provision being considered almost an interference (Bifulco, 2011). With regard to labour market policies, Lombardy has seen the introduction of two main regional laws intended to implement the main provisions of the national reform boost outlined above. Accordingly, the first law (*Legge Regionale 1/1999*) regulated the regional governing tasks (addressing, planning, coordination and evaluation) in matters of active labour market policies as well as the administrative decentralisation for their implementation, assigning to the Provinces the competences of planning and management of public employment services (including matching and monitoring functions). The second law (*Legge Regionale 22/2006*) took, however, a step back to a stronger concentration of competences on the regional level on the one hand, but pushing towards a system of competitive provision of employment services by both private and public providers, on the other, and leaving to the Provinces the tasks of planning and implementing local policies (Ambra et al., 2013). This push towards a stronger marketisation of employment services was matched, on the side of the individual (as purchaser), by the introduction of a so-called *dote* system (Sabatinelli & Villa, 2011). The *dote* (literally: endowment) is a kind of voucher, an economic entitlement (defined, however, on a category-related basis) that the person can spend in order to purchase different services. The extension to this system also to employment services was intended, on the one hand, to foster marketisation and competition in this field and to better connect training and labour market policies. On the other hand, relating to individual persons, the dote should stimulate them to activate themselves, maintaining at the same time their freedom of choice as consumers of services. In their conference paper, Sabatinelli and Villa provide an analysis of this system and its

implications, pointing out that both local authorities and accredited bodies are almost excluded from planning processes and mainly reduced to their role as service providers in a quasi-market environment. With regard to individual persons, Sabatinelli and Villa point out that the dote system

> depicts a specific but coherent actualisation of some of the paradoxical logics that the literature already attributed to the activation discourse. For instance, about the underestimation of social causes of unemployment, the way in which the individual is regarded as autonomous and responsible, the disappearance of the real conditions whereby this autonomy and responsibility can be exercised; the paradox to push towards autonomy, predefining every kind of step to get it and the form it has to assume … In this sense, individualisation is moved from the meaning of a paradigm that qualifies the relationship among *means, contents, processes and goals* to a mere level of *administrative, financial and relational strict* regulation. (2011, pp. 19f)

3.1.3 Public employment services in the city of Vienna

Vienna is not only the biggest city and the capital of Austria, but at the same time it is one of the nine Austrian federal states (*Bundesländer*). The city and metropolitan area of Vienna is Austria's political, cultural and economic centre. Vienna's economy was characterised by its strong focus on national markets and by a high share of public sector employment. Despite the decline of the manufacturing sector and retarded service sector growth, employment in Vienna was still growing up to the 1970s due to the Austro-Keynesian politics of deficit spending and expansion of public sector employment. Although first signs of crisis of the post-war growth model already began to arise during the 1970s, major changes in the Austrian economy occurred from the second half of the 1980s. The fall of the Iron Curtain, as well as Austria's accession to the European Union, forced the economy in the Viennese metropolitan area to abandon its national orientation and to integrate itself into the internationalising economy, which resulted in a process of strong economic restructuring with the expansion of the private service sector, especially the retailing, banking and insurance business (Schmee & Weigl, 1999; Mayerhofer, 2007).

These processes had important consequences in terms of demand for qualified workforce, while low-skilled workers were increasingly faced with severe problems on the labour market. While up to the second half of the 1980s, unemployment in Vienna had been only slightly above and varied in parallel to the national average, since then there has been a growing divergence between the unemployment level in Vienna and in the rest of the country. During periods of crisis in particular, unemployment in Vienna rises more significantly, with especially high rates among low-qualified and migrant workers (Atzmüller, 2009b).

Labour market policy in Austria falls under the responsibility of the Federal Ministry, today's Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, the Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz. The Austrian Public Employment Service AMS implements the labour market policy of the Federal Government and has the overall aims of offering services both for job-seekers and enterprises and generally promoting the adaptability of the labour force. The AMS assumes its role as a service provision enterprise under public law in close cooperation with labour and employers' organisations, offering advice, information, qualification opportunities and financial assistance as well as matching services to constantly connect job-seekers and job openings on the labour market. The organisational structure of the AMS in Vienna comprises the AMS Landesgeschäftsstelle Wien (AMS Federal state office for Vienna), twelve local branch offices allocated across the Viennese territory and a the AMS Wien Jugendliche, a specialised branch office for young job-seekers aged up to 21 years.

Furthermore, in 1995 the city of Vienna founded a special local ALMP institution, the so-called WAFF (Wiener ArbeitnehmerInnen Förderungsfonds), which is attached to the Vienna City Council's economic and finance department and works on specific challenges of the Viennese labour market in addition to the labour market policy decided by the Federal Government and in close cooperation with the AMS and the social partners. As Atzmüller (2009b) points out, the aim of the WAFF is to help people to stay in employment and to develop their potential through measures that go beyond the scope of services provided by the AMS, focusing on high-quality training strategies and on social integration and labour market policy programmes which do not focus only on quick labour market re-entry but are based "on

the idea of helping people cope with personal and private problems as a precondition for successful reintegration into employment" (p. 606).

3.1.4 Public employment services in the city of Milan

Interestingly, despite the strong push towards marketisation of employment services in the Lombardy region, the Province of Milan choose the way of a general relaunch of its public employment services. The Province of Milan set up the Agenzie per la Formazione, l'Orientamento e il Lavoro (AFOL), special agencies for training, guidance and work, which cover the whole metropolitan area of Milan. These AFOL agencies are special enterprises of the Provincial Authority with their own legal status and management autonomy. They were founded with the idea of a general relaunch of public employment, orientation and training services and their better integration and institutional coordination.

In the city of Milan, services are provided by the AFOL Milano (today AFOL Metropolitana), set up in 2007. AFOL Milano was set up as an umbrella organisation which incorporated different, formerly separated, services, such as the public employment centre and career guidance and vocational training centres. The general aim of the AFOL is to offer a spectrum of services to both citizens and employers intended to reduce and to prevent unemployment, to improve the quality of work, to invest in the development of human resources and to support economic development on the local and regional scale. In particular, the employment service Centro per l'impiego offers the traditional public employment services, such as the management of job placement lists and a job database system, but also different support services to special target groups of job-seekers, pre-selection and matching services, as well as an enterprise help desk and a job call centre. Moreover, AFOL Milano manages training services through its three vocational training centres, the Centri di formazione professionale, while guidance services are offered by specialised career guidance services (Polo Orientamento and Job Caffè). These guidance services offer information spaces where people can browse through newspapers or surf the internet for job offers and access AFOL's data bases and job-seeking software. Furthermore, people can use computers and get advice in preparing their CVs and their presentation documents there. For more

individual support and advice for job-seeking as well as the discussion of individual professional or educational choices, people can also have one-to-one interviews with professional advisers. These guidance services also offer services for special target groups, such as women who want to re-enter the labour market or migrants, as well as school guidance projects and special guidance for secondary school drop-outs. Another specialised service is the career guidance service tailored to the needs of jobless middle and high managers, the Servizio Alte Professionalità, which also tries to connect them with enterprises wishing to fill middle and high management positions. These guidance services take part in European projects and international networks, such as the EURES network and the Citè des Metiers International Network (Città dei Mestieri e delle Professioni), and they also work on regional projects and funding. The above- mentioned dote vouchers, for instance, can be used to get training services offered by the AFOL.

3.2 The Research Project

3.2.1 Research aims and questions

As shown in the first part of the book, the current debate and research literature takes increasingly into account the operational side of activation policies and also acknowledges the fact that frontline practice matters in relation to what activation eventually means for unemployed people. However, research inspired by policy implementation approaches often frames the issue of frontline practice merely as an implementation and organisational issue, focusing on the notion of discretion in relation to the implementation of formal policy goals. Additionally, it has been pointed out how critical approaches inspired by Foucauldian thinking on governmentality look on frontline practice as governing people through the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 2000, p. 341), i.e. the tricky combinations of external constraints and subtle strategies of subjectification for self-government. These perspectives have been additionally complemented with an approach of interpretive policy analysis inspired by the hermeneutic tradition that highlights the importance of situated agency in policy analysis and focuses on local practices and meaning-making capacities of policy actors as situated agents.

Against this background, the overall aim of this research project has been to explore and to better understand how frontline workers in activation services as situated agents and thus, as crucial actors within the policy-making chain, interpret their role and how they represent the ways they act and move in practice by making use of their discretional spaces and against the background of their practical judgements.

The project was inspired by the idea that exploring the practice of activation on the frontline of services makes an important contribution towards better telling the full activation story. Brodkin and Marson (2013) point out the discontinuities which often exist between examining workfare and activation strategies on the ground and research conducted on more abstract levels. There is, hence, a growing interest in opening the street-level practice of activation and putting it at the forefront of analysis in order to understand how activation after all works on the ground. This is particularly important in relation to the question as to which implications activation strategies have on social citizenship, not only formally, but in concrete terms, when rights and duties are calibrated and embodied by contractual agreements and individual activation plans stipulated between frontline practitioners and the unemployed (especially if they are beneficiaries of public benefits).

Obviously, opening up street-level practice for further explorations and investigations can involve different entry points and research strategies. So why interview frontline practitioners? Focusing on frontline practitioners and asking them directly about their daily street-level practice can provide insights into their practice representations, their sense-making and their use of discretion. This perspective might, thus, help to understand how meanings and sense-making processes of practitioners influence their practical judgements and their decisions in the inevitable tension between legal and bureaucratic requirements, on the one hand, and the particulars of real people's needs and human encounters at the frontline of public employment services, on the other, or as Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) point out, "in a world where identity and moral judgements are bound up with the quotidian work of the state" (p. 8).

Looking at frontline practice from this angle is particularly important for the debate on the possibilities and constraints for the professionalisation of activation work. Activation work is often framed more as an administrative

than as a professional activity and implementation research often conceives street-level practice mainly as an issue of discretion management without taking account of the political, normative and ethical implications of frontline work. Even in contributions urging for the professionalisation of activation work, the notion of professionalism is not always challenged and the debate on constraints and possibilities for a process of professionalisation in this ambiguous field is sometimes lacking the constant reconnection to the ambiguity of the notion of activation itself and to its interpretations in policy design and implementation including the resulting challenges in frontline practice. The findings of this project contribute to this debate by providing findings on how frontline practitioners represent and frame the challenges of their frontline activity and how they try to react to and to cope with them.

The decision to adopt a comparative perspective has been inspired by the attempt to analyse how the challenges of frontline activation work are represented by practitioners in two different national realities with different policy frameworks and governance structures and, thus, also in two very different organisational and practice contexts. These different active labour market policy and practice frameworks have to be seen also against the background of very different economic and political situations, where challenges differ both quantitatively and qualitatively and where labour market and public employment service reform attempts are characterised by different priorities and path-dependent trajectories. At the same time, both the metropolitan areas of Vienna and Milan are the economic centre of the respective country and in both realities there have been notable efforts for the relaunch of public employment services and for the investment in activation strategies. Although general policy intentions, as well as the official organisational logics of the public employment services in the two cities show many similarities, different benefits regimes and, thus, different entitlements and procedures, as well as services, create quite different practice contexts which also involve differences in where activation work is carried out and what it means in practice. It can be, in any case, assumed that in spite of different contextual factors, people drawing upon public employment services have at least similar needs and problems which are encountered by frontline practitioners.

Accordingly, the research intention was not to offer a systematic comparative case study of the activation policy and practice context in Vienna

and Milan, but was concentrated on giving voice to frontline practitioners as policy actors by exploring the policy interpretations, practice representations and challenges they experience in the direct interaction with their clients. Of course, similarities and differences which emerge from these representations of frontline activation workers reflect the different modes of governance, organisational solutions and management practices which constitute the concrete conditions for frontline practice. Due to the explorative qualitative approach of the project, the interpretation of findings must proceed cautiously in (not) making causal links with the external framework. Anyway, the interpretations and the sense-making of frontline practitioners which emerge from their narrative accounts of what is going on in practice has to do with the ways the notion of activation has been taken up and interpreted along the policy-making chain. The focus of this project, however, concentrates on the last link of this chain where the policy is brought to the people and where frontline practitioners have to mediate between policy goals and people's needs.

The general aims of the research project were broken down into sets of concrete research questions which provided, then, the basic grid for the construction of a more detailed interview guideline. The main research questions of the research project were the following:

How do frontline practitioners in public employment services interpret and represent the practice of activation?

How do they contextualise what they are doing on the street level in a wider social policy context and how do they, in particular, interpret the notion of activation?

Where do frontline practitioners see their discretional spaces and how do they make use of them?

How do frontline practitioners see (and construct) the users of public employment services?

3.2.2 The overall research design and the method of qualitative interviewing

Decisions related to research design and methodology derive from the basic epistemological perspective and intent and have to fit in with the specific research aims in order to provide relevant data. Accordingly, it is clear that this project required a qualitative approach in the tradition of the sociology of Verstehen. In this project it was crucial to understand which meanings frontline practitioners bring to what they are doing and to explore how these meanings influence the frontline practice of activation. In this sense, what practitioners eventually do has to be conceived as their "meaning in action" (Wagenaar, 2011) and exploring their meanings serves as the critical entry point to understand what Weber (1908/1994) calls the qualitative aspect of phenomena ("*die qualitative Färbung der Vorgänge*", p. 173).

Accordingly, this perspective and research intent required going in depth, expanding into what practitioners think and into how they make sense of their job and, thus, going and asking them directly, interviewing them on this issues. Interviewing as a research method is more than just going out there and ask questions to people. At the same time, it is still going out there and asking questions to people, getting information from "living sources", i.e. through conversation (and, hence, social interaction) with people who might be experts, who of course have been informed and have given their consent for the interview, but who are also "strangers" (Weiss, 1994) asked questions in an artificial setting. Thus, the art and method of qualitative interviewing and, eventually, also the quality of data depend on how this process and, indeed, interaction occurs and succeeds. This means that there is no single approach or a fixed set of simple guidelines on how to do qualitative interviews and interviewing is by its nature relational, dynamic, creative and flexible. However, this is not an excuse for an "anything-goes" approach or for doing whatever the researcher wants do to. On the contrary, qualitative interviewing involves careful preparation and planning as well as the reflexive management and control of the interviewing process.[35] This

35 As Sandelowski and Barroso (2002) state, "reflexivity is a hallmark of excellent qualitative research and it entails the ability and willingness of researchers to acknowledge and take account of the many ways they themselves influence research findings and thus what comes to be accepted as knowledge. Reflexivity implies the ability to reflect inward toward

is often underestimated and there are frequent misconceptions about qualitative interviewing as just asking questions to someone, as something simple and self-evident, as something everyone knows how to do (Oakley, 1981).

The methodological debate has developed a broad body of knowledge and an overwhelming body of literature concerning different approaches on, different models and formats of, and different techniques for, qualitative interviewing (Kuhn, 1962; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Froschauer & Lueger, 2003; Legard et al., 2003; Bogner et al., 2005; Helfferich, 2005; Gläser & Laudel, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Depending on its purposes in a specific research design, the interview can vary in relation to its setting and structure. Defining the setting and the structure of the interview has to take carefully into account a few basic questions relating to who the interviewees are and to the ways they are most likely to provide relevant information or, in other words, to what extent and how knowledge "out there" can be captured and/or constructed in the interview situation (Legard et al., 2003). Accordingly, in literature different models and types of qualitative interviews have been developed and distinguished, varying in relation to their setting (e.g. one-to-one vs. group interviews, face-to-face vs. mediated) and structure (open vs. (semi-)structured, in-depth vs. "surface") but also in relation to the involvement of and the interaction with the interviewer, and not least, the association with previous knowledge and theoretical assumptions ("tabula rasa" vs. theoretically guided asking). Different models of interviews are also distinguished in relation to specific research purposes (e.g. biographical interviews) or in relation to the application of certain techniques (e.g. guided interviews, dilemma interviews, critical incident interviews).

The methodological choices for planning and realising the interviews for this research project have included both the model of the expert interview and the model of the problem-centred interview: Furthermore the interview involved the application of a vignette technique. The following paragraphs

oneself as an inquirer; outward to the cultural, historical, linguistic, political, and other forces that shape everything about inquiry; and, in between researcher and participant to the social interaction they share." (p. 22)

briefly describe the interview models referred to as well as the vignette technique adopted.

A first interview type referred to in the context of this research project is the so-called expert interview (Meuser & Nagel, 2005, 2009; Bogner & Menz, 2005; Bogner et al., 2005; Littig, 2009; Gläser & Laudel, 2010). The expert interview is applied in qualitative research projects concerning special experiences and knowledge as a result of responsibilities and actions given by a specific functional status within an institutional and organisational context. This knowledge can relate to the specific organisational and professional tasks of experts, but also to their more implicit (or tacit) knowledge about routines, informal rules of decision-making, and orientation and interpretation patterns in practice. In this sense, expert knowledge can be technical knowledge about administrative and professional competences and procedures, process-related knowledge about routines, interactions and ways of "getting jobs done" in practice and last, but not least, interpretative knowledge about orientation and sense-making patterns of experts (Bogner & Menz, 2005). As Meuser and Nagel (2009) point out, only since the 1990s have a better theoretical underpinning of the expert interview been developed and specific methodological approaches on interviewing experts been discussed in the literature (Meuser & Nagel, 2005, 2009; Bogner & Menz, 2005; Bogner et al., 2005; Littig, 2009; Gläser & Laudel, 2010). Meuser and Nagel (2009) point out that the notion of expert necessarily has the dual meaning of both holding a certain institutional or professional position (and, thus, of possessing expert knowledge) and of being considered an expert in relation to a given research interest. Accordingly, Meuser and Nagel (2009) define an expert as a person who is responsible for the development, implementation and control of problem-solving strategies or policies and who has privileged access to information about groups of persons or decision processes. Also Littig (2009) points out that an expert is a person having decision-making power and special knowledge which significantly influences the freedom of others to act. Expert knowledge can never be considered as neutral or as being exempt from power issues, as experts always play a vital role in the definition of both problems and solutions (even in the mundane sphere of bureaucracy and of practical "real-world" solutions in everyday life). In fact, in the context of interpretative policy analysis, the expert interview is gaining in importance, also in

comparative approaches (see e.g. Pickel & Pickel, 2009). It is, however, important to reflect on the availability of knowledge and to not take the fact that expert knowledge is always already there as manifest and conscious too much for granted, even more so if the interview is intended to focus on implicit process knowledge and on more latent interpretation patterns, too. These considerations are of crucial importance in relation to the framing of questions, the structure of the interview and also to the interaction during the interview process. The more the dimensions of tacit knowledge on informal strategies and of orientation and sense-making patterns are be considered, the more important it is to go beneath the surface of official narratives and to go into depth by giving space to wider narrative accounts and deeper considerations.

In the context of this research project, it has been important to consider and to acknowledge frontline practitioners as experts who have important insights both into specific administrative regulations and procedures as well as into practice routines and decision-making processes on the street-level, and who are also in powerful positions of transforming policies into practices and of reacting to dilemmas and taking account (or not) of individual circumstances. It has been, however, also important to interview in depth and to give them the space to tell their stories and to express their ways of dealing and coping with the challenges and difficulties of their job. As has proved to be the case throughout the interviews, frontline practitioners are used to constantly informing about their job and to accounting for what they are doing. But they rarely seem to have opportunities to speak about what is (really) going on at the services frontline and to tell their stories of dilemmas, reactions and meanings.

Interviewing frontline practitioners as experts and in relation to what extent and how frontline work matters for shaping activation on the ground requires a sound knowledge of the debate on the implementation of activation policies and a clear and theoretically-informed concept about what to ask frontline practitioners. At the same time, the interviews also needed a certain degree of openness in order to allow practitioners to come up with their narrative accounts for the empirically-grounded capture of interpretative patterns and the generation of new concepts. In this context, the problem-centred interview defined by Witzel (1982, 2000) provides a very useful interview model, which neutralises "the alleged contradiction between being directed

by theory or being open-minded" (Witzel, 2000, n. p.) and allows for a combination of deductive and inductive thinking. The problem-centred interview uses theoretical knowledge as elastic concepts and tries to further develop them by the inductive analysis of the obtained data. Witzel defines the model of the problem-centred interview with three basic principles. The first principle is the problem-centreed orientation towards a previously-defined and socially-relevant problem. The second, called object orientation, underlines the orientation towards the research matter and argues for methodical flexibility. In this sense, the interview must not follow a strictly pre-structured format, but its concrete adaption must be appropriate to the given object of the research. With the principle of process orientation, Witzel finally emphasises the need for a flexible combination of gathering and interpreting data throughout the research process that might lead to new aspects and problems, requiring additional information for understanding and interpretation. This way, the problem-centred interview can break down the artificialness of the research situation and interviewees become involved in a smoother conversation rather than feeling forced to just answer separate questions. In this sense, a flexible interview guideline is a crucial element of the problem-centred interview. According to Witzel (2000), the guideline serves as

> a supportive device to reinforce the interviewer's memory on the topics of research and provide a framework of orientation to ensure comparability of interviews. In addition, some ideas for lead questions into individual topics and preformulated questions to start the discussion are included. Ideally, they accompany the communication process as a sort of transparency of the background, serving to supervise how individual elements in the course of the discussion are worked through. (§ 3)

Finally, the considerations concerning the interview also have to address questions on how to start the interview and, moreover, how to deal with the fact that the interviews are made in two different policy and practice contexts. For both these issues, it seemed appropriate to use an initial stimulus which could be held constant in different situations. An interesting technique in this respect is the use of a prepared hypothetical example, or a so-called "vignette". Finch (1987, p. 105) defines vignettes as "short stories about hy-

pothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond".[36] Vignettes are used within the qualitative paradigm in order to "elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations" (Barter & Renold, 1999, n. p.). Barter and Renold propose that within the qualitative paradigm, vignettes can be used as ice-breakers in order to facilitate the discussion at the beginning of the interview, as a technique to tap general attitudes and beliefs or to explore sensitive topics. They can also be useful for examining different interpretations and perceptions of a given situation and in this sense, "introduce an element of consistency which can be useful, allowing comparison between the reactions of different participants to the same hypothetical example" (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003, p. 129). Vignettes are often used in research with professionals and in order to explore professional values and judgements (for the use of vignettes in qualitative research into social work values see, for instance, Wilks, 2004).

For the purposes of this research project, the constructed vignette depicts the situation of a young person sent to the public employment service. The interviews were initiated by presenting the vignette and by asking some questions on what the public employment service could offer in this situation, on how the practitioners would make a first assessment and on what the relevant elements to know how to start an individualised activation project would be. The use of the vignette was indeed helpful as an ice-breaker for starting the conversation and also as a tool of systematically asking at the beginning of the interview how practitioners approach a situation, what the possible intake procedures are and what possible service offers in the given situation could be. It turned out, however, that the most important aspect was that it provided a stimulus for practitioners to come up with their own examples and with their own stories which added depth by taking up their points, flexibly reacting to their arguments and reconnecting them to the research questions.

36 Similar definitions are given within the qualitative paradigm. Hill (1997) defines them as "short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios," (p. 177), Hazel (1995) speaks of "concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion" (n. p.) and Hughes (1998) speaks of "stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes" (p. 381).

Interviewing involves, however, more than just choosing a certain format or applying one particular technique instead of another one. As Kuhn (1962) reminds us, interviewing has to be seen also as a performance which must avoid the risks of mystification on the one hand and of loss of sincerity in attempting to over-manage the interview situation on the other. In this sense, interviewing always needs a certain degree of flexibility and a pinch of methodological pragmatism, too, in order to adapt to the interview situation and to the world of the individuals who are being interviewed.

What is of crucial importance is to constantly bear in mind that interviewing always implies a deeper dimension related to the self and the other (Fine, 1994) and that the other is not a distant and faceless respondent but a living human being who agreed to participate in the "inter-view" in the sense of interchanging views on issues of mutual interest. This requires openness and the willingness to disclosure and deserves, thus, attentiveness and respect. This has been very important also in the context of this research project. Exploring what their job means to frontline practitioners and how they deal with challenges and dilemmas (maybe also in more hidden ways) cannot be taken as a matter of course but needs an interview setting and an interview interaction based on openness and on mutual trust.

It follows that ethical considerations in qualitative interviewing have to go beyond the mere fulfillment of standard criteria and to take into account the finer dimensions of attitudes and stances and, indeed, tuning, between people who are having a conversation with a specific purpose. Obviously, traditional ethical concerns such as informed consent, guarantee of absolute anonymity and protection from harm have to be taken seriously as sine qua non. But the interviewer in qualitative social research has to reflect critically on the fact that his or her ethical concerns and attitudes are intrinsically tied to the questions as to how to conduct the interview and, eventually, also to the quality of gained data. This means taking the political and ethical nature of qualitative interviewing throughout the whole research process seriously, thereby assuring also the quality of the latter. In this sense, it is important to remember that "sound ethics and sound methodology go hand in hand" (Sieber, 1992, p. 4) or, as Blumer (1986) has already pointed out with his simple injunction, to "respect the nature of the empirical world and organise a methodological stance to reflect that respect" (p. 60).

3.2.3 The research process from field access to data analysis

While general considerations in relation to the research design and to the method of qualitative interviewing have already been discussed in the previous subchapter, the following paragraphs give a structured overview on the whole research process, providing further steps and considerations in relation to data generation, management and analysis.

Besides preparing and testing the interview instruments, important stages for data generation concerned access and sampling. The first step in this regard consisted of gaining access to the public employment services in the city of Vienna and Milan.

Getting access to the AMS in Vienna was possible by contacting a key figure within the AMS Federal State Office for Vienna who agreed to an appointment in order to present the research intent. Subsequently, this person provided the contacts to twelve frontline practitioners in different local branch offices (four in the AMS for young people and eight in other local branch offices) who had already agreed to participate in the interview.

Similarly, access to the AFOL in Milan could be gained through the direct help of the directors of employment and career guidance services of AFOL Milano, who agreed to an appointment for the presentation of the project. Subsequently, they also provided the contacts to 13 frontline practitioners who had also already been asked to participate in the interview.

This sampling strategy shows both the strength and weaknesses of a convenience sampling and it could be argued that it was additionally biased by the fact that the interviewees were not chosen directly by the researcher but by the contact persons and from a higher hierarchical level of the service organisation. As the small scale and qualitative nature of the research project does in any case not allow for any claims of representativeness, this sampling strategy appears acceptable, because otherwise it would have been very difficult or, even impossible, to get directly in contact with frontline practitioners.

The next steps consisted of directly contacting the interview partners via e-mail, giving them a description of the research intent in advance and explaining why their point of view was important for the research project. Their consent to participate was requested and an appointment for the interview was set.

The interviews in the AMS offices in Vienna were conducted from the end of November 2011 until the end of January 2012. The duration of the interviews varied between approximately an hour and an hour and a half. All the interview partners in Vienna had reserved enough time for the interview in their schedules and the interviews could be conducted with ease and in a closed and private setting. In two cases, the interview partners involved also a colleague, so that two of the twelve interviews involved two interviewees. This way, a total of 14 practitioners could be interviewed in the AMS offices in Vienna. The interviews in Vienna were conducted in German.

The interviews in Milan were conducted between early February and mid-March 2012. Not all the practitioners in Milan could participate in a one-to-one interview and therefore the data collection has seen a mix of individual and group interviews. This has, of course, introduced some cases of bias, although the interview could go into depth anyway and the interviewed practitioners spoke nonetheless quite openly about challenges, difficulties and personal stances. At the same time, the group interviews developed a different dynamic and the fact that the interviewees reacted to each other facilitated the debate and enhanced the reflexive content of the conversation. The interviews had a duration of about an hour for the individual interviews and between two hours and two hours and twenty minutes for the group interview. From the 13 persons whose contact had been provided, some had been transferred to other services or projects within the AFOL context, had quit the job or never answered the interview request, so that, in the end, only nine frontline practitioners could be interviewed for the AFOL context in Milan. The interviews in Milan were conducted in Italian.

The interviews were taped, with the exception of one interview where the practitioner refused taping.

The recordings of the interviews were fully transcribed, taking into account only the spoken content disregarding pauses (with the exception of extended pauses for reflection which were only remarked without indicating their duration), fillers and crutch words without textual relevance and comments to signal active listening. The translation from talk to text tried to be as true to the conversation as possible, giving higher priority to the proximity of the spoken word than to the form and sentence structure of the written text and maintaining also dialect terms and phrases as well as contractions as

spoken in the interview. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo 9, the software used for the further data management and analysis.

The analysis of the obtained data was carried out applying the method of qualitative content analysis as defined by Mayring (2000, 2010). This method of qualitative content analysis is used to extract evidence about the content of qualitative data material systematically and to interpret meaning from the identified content. Qualitative content analysis is applied if the data obtained in qualitative interviews can be taken as evidence for what interviewees usually, ordinarily, generally believe and for their general understandings of themes (Gomm, 2008[37]; Gläser & Laudel, 2010). In this sense, content analysis can also be defined as "the use of replicable and valid method for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of its source" (Krippendorf, 1969, p. 103). One of the distinctive elements of qualitative content analysis in comparison with other methods of analysis in the qualitative paradigm is that text interpretation follows the research questions, which provide a first framework of themes, and that the analysis can combine deductive category application with inductive category development from the data. In qualitative content analysis, first themes or rough categories can be carefully founded on the basis of the research questions and these categories are then progressively revised and refined within the process of data analysis and by constant feedback loops. According to Mayring (2000, n. p.), the main idea of the procedure of analysis in qualitative content analysis is

> to formulate a criterion of definition, derived from theoretical background and research question, which determines the aspects of the textual material taken into account. Following this criterion, the material is worked through and categories are tentative and deduced step by step. Within a feedback loop those categories are revised, eventually reduced to main categories and checked in respect to their reliability.

Accordingly, the analysis of the obtained material started from the background of a rough sketch of themes and the coding of the material. Coding as the marking of text passages already occurred within a general heuris-

37 Gomm (2008) prefers the term "thematic analysis" as a qualitative version of content analysis.

tic framework and as a cyclical act of checking and further refining the system of themes, concepts and emerging categories by grasping the meaning brought to them by the different interviewees. Thus, the codes served indeed as the meaning-capturing elements in the analysis that were subsequently clustered together as patterns and which progressively refined and developed the system of categories and eventually, the analysis, of their connections (Saldaña, 2009).

4. Activation Work in Vienna and Milan — Findings From the Frontline

4.1 Frontline Work in the Arbeitsmarktservice (AMS) Context in Vienna

4.1.1 "It's your own business…": Practitioners' self-conceptions

In the interviews much attention was given to the thematic field of practitioners' self-conceptions, to the descriptions of what they are doing and to the interpretations of their role and mandate. The interviewees were asked how they describe their activities and their role in the context of activation policies and services both in the interaction with service users and in describing their job to an outsider. But their self-conceptions emerge also from the very rich descriptions they gave of their daily practice and the different challenges they have to face. The interpretations practitioners give of their role and mandate are insofar crucial, as they are related to all main aspects discussed in the interviews, such as the range of services on offer, the interpretation of the notion of activation, the use of discretion, the relation with clients and the definition of success in this practice field.

A first important criterion is the orientation in practitioners' representations of their mandate. Of course, ideal-typical juxtapositions serve to point out different orientations and most of the time practitioners refer to different orientations as well as to the possible conflicts between them when they illustrate what their job is about. However, the emphasis in the interpretations of respondents differs along a continuum between a more user-oriented interpretation of the mandate and a more institutional and regulatory-oriented interpretation of the mandate. Differences in emphasis vary depending both on the target groups practitioners are working with and on the challenges and difficulties practitioners have to face. Interestingly, the user orientation seems to be stronger in the representations of practitioners who work with young people or with regard to service users with fewer difficulties and higher capabilities and motivation. In user-oriented interpretations, a strong emphasis is placed on the dimension of creating an interpersonal relationship and on the notion of help and support.

Describing the initial contact of a counselling process, a practitioner who is working in the counselling zone (*Beratungszone)* of a special office for young people (AMS Jugendliche), e.g., pointed out:

> We become a bit acquainted with each other. I have to, I am not a social worker, I am not a psychologist, anyway. I have to meet the needs of the young people. I see this as extremely important, to know what is distressing them in this situation. There has to be something which has brought them into the situation they are in. […] The point is to find out with every user, at least for me it's like that, I cannot speak for all colleagues, but I try to find out with every client individually, what he or she needs. And I cannot move myself according to a certain scheme, I do not have a specific scheme.[38]

Very similar are the representations given by another practitioner in the same office, of how she understands her job:

> I am more the carer. I like to go into the details, because then it is easier for me. […] I believe that everybody has a different approach. Some are more meticulous and others, like me, are more... probably I even annoy the youngsters sometimes, because they say: "I already have a mummy like you at home who is whining and grumbling!" But it is my approach, to appeal to their conscience. And others don't do that. They define concrete requirements and, if someone does not stick to the rules, then there is a sanction. Others try again anyway, one more time. "Ok, let's try one more time, and then..." And I am probably one of these ones.

Both representations show that there are different ways of interpreting this role and that the given mandate allows different ways of doing this job. Remarkably, most respondents who emphasise user orientation and underline the importance of a helping relationship represent these dimensions as part of their very own approach, remaining rather unclear as to whether they conceive them as a necessary professional interpretation of the given role or if the sensibility for these dimensions is rather a personal addition to what the actual job is about. As one practitioner pointed out, the original definition of

38 All interview quotes in Section 4.1 were translated from German by the author.

the job is that of an administrative activity and it depends on the different practitioner's interpretations in which direction it eventually goes.

> There are colleagues who are personally, how shall I define or say that, who are rather oriented towards the interest of the client, who go rather in the direction of social work, who often come from the social area and who perceive the job here in a different way. And then there are the colleagues who perceive this job as it has been officially defined, I think: an administrative activity and support for quick job search and placement.

Interestingly, if advisers come from a social work background this is often seen in a more critical way rather than considered an advantage. Apparently a social work approach is associated with being too "social" for frontline practice in activation services and related to a strong inclination to help people in a more comprehensive way and a lower ability to dissociate oneself from problematic situations. One practitioner pointed out:

> You mustn't be too social in your attitudes. But you should also be able to be comprehensive towards the people who are sitting in front of you. Yes, it's hard for a social worker to do this job. We already had colleagues who came here from a social work background. In part, they went away again. Because they said that they couldn't deliver that. They said: "That's not my mentality!"

Practitioners from a social work background themselves see their background as an advantage either in relation to establishing and managing helping relationships or in terms of knowledge about the range of different social services on offer in the city which they can give information on to service users in need. However, a social work approach does not necessarily seem to be associated with a more critical perspective on activation policy and practice, at least not explicitly.

In any case, in this first orientation pattern terms referring to interpersonal relationships are frequent and the focus remains mostly limited to a interpersonal dimension of help and support. Accordingly, critical remarks concern predominantly the available resources, especially the lack of time, which impede "doing more" in terms of relationship building and of finding

out more about the personal situation of the users in order to offer more tailor-made support. A critical awareness about the ambiguities of the mandate itself or of activation policies in a broader sense is, however, less evident or, at least, less pronounced in the representations of practice. In this sense, within this pattern, practitioners are clearly oriented towards service users' needs, an individually-aligned approach, and tailor-made offer of support. At the same time, it could be argued that within this orientation pattern there is a higher risk of losing sight of problematic aspects of the policy context and the given mandate and of contributing indirectly to their concealment. Thus, such an orientation could likely become a functional support for the implementation process of debatable policy provisions by "giving them a human face".

In contrast, a more institutional and regulatory interpretation is clearer in pointing out what the given mandate is "really" about and what the constraints of the mandate are. This orientation pattern is given more emphasis in representations of practitioners who work with adults or in relation to less-employable target groups who are perceived as more problematic, as having multiple difficulties in labour market integration or simply as less motivated or too "choosy" for a quick placement. Institutional and regulatory-oriented representations focus on the limits of what practitioners can do and are in charge of. A practitioner working with mixed adult target groups who is very aware and openly speaks of the tensions and limits in activation work made clear what the primary mandate of the job eventually is:

> Our primary mandate is to end unemployment as soon as possible. This is our primary mandate. […] I can remember some counselling interviews, where I considered myself to be more on the other side of the table, ideologically at least. Where I can fully understand the point, where I say to the service user: "That's all well and good, privately I do understand that, but you have to inform yourself about what the legal situation is. It is not our job to satisfy your wishes." […] Eventually, I work for the State. The State defines the goals for me.

Another practitioner working with mixed adult target groups was even clearer as to what the mandate, or better what the institution itself is about.

> The basis on which we are working is the unemployment insurance legislation. That's just how it is. And our mandate is clear. So, it's difficult sometimes. They come here and say: "Oh, counselling zone, here I can get advice!" But it's not about social policy. We are a mere labour market institution.

However, practitioners who depict their job in a more institutional and regulatory pattern do not exclude user orientation either, and all of them declare that they try to be as supportive as possible within the limits of their mandate, even if they report that their "hands are often tied". Practitioners whose presentations of their job clearly point out the limits of what they are in charge of often seem to be even more aware of the contradictions in their practice and of the notion of activation in general. A very interesting point is, however, that their argumentation differs in the way they deal with the constraints of their primary mandate and the often problematic and challenging situations of service users. A few practitioners recognise the limits of their mandate but at the same time point out that going beyond it is, or better, would be, often necessary in order to achieve the aims of their job. In this sense, their critique is part of a more professional argumentation, although it is often presented as their personal opinion. The point is, however, that within this perspective, a broader approach and a better responsiveness to the issues underlying unemployment are considered as an appropriate dimension of a professional approach. Accordingly, they criticise mainly the lack of time which hinders them in deepening their work with the clients and in focusing more on underlying aspects in order to give more specific and more enduring support and, eventually, also to perform better in their job. One of the interviewed practitioners put it as follows:

> I think we all know that priority has to be given to the job search or to support in looking for a job. We are in charge of that. But, if you see then that there is nothing going on, you know. After all, one begins to ask what this is due to. And often that's difficult to find out. And the time you have is often too short. […] Generally, and that is now my own opinion, if you don't clarify the underlying things, he will never find a stable job.

Another practitioner from the office for young people bemoaned the lack of time to better attend to the young people and the fact that, consequently, a lot of aspects cannot be considered or have to be handed over to other, external, institutions while at least some colleagues would be capable of giving a more comprehensive assistance and, thus, also work more efficiently and effectively:

> Well, they would need more guidance. They would need more constant assistance. I am convinced that there are many colleagues here at the AMS who have a lot of additional qualifications, who have the sensitivity for people and why should I send them to an external institution, for having coaching elsewhere, when we could do that here on our own. Maybe even more efficiently. […] With young people particularly, it could be interesting to keep some things here in our own hands. If I had more time for certain service users, I could attend to them better and call them here more often, if I had more appointments for them: "Ok, then come back and we do this and that together, you show me...", I believe that I could work in a more effective way.

A second and even more pronounced line of argumentation within this more institutional and regulatory-oriented pattern is different insofar as the dimension of being as attentive and as responsive as possible to the individual situation within the given limits (or in extreme cases even beyond them) is not seen as a functional aspect within the given mandate. Rather, it is represented as a mere personal concern or claim which has nothing to do, and often even conflicts, with the real aim of the job, i.e. to end unemployment (status) as soon as possible. This position is characterised by an explicit detachment of a person-oriented perspective from the primary mandate of the job. In this sense, the understanding of individual problems and the respect for difficulties is represented as a mere private accommodation, as part of a rather personal strategy aimed at finding a personally agreeable way to do this job. Structural difficulties and contradictions which are inherent in activation policies and which obviously concretise in the here and now of practice have to be dealt with in a rather individual and personal way. In fact, this argumentation pattern does not go along with an uncritical position towards the difficulties and contradictions of practice. On the contrary, these practitioners

seem to be particularly aware of the limits of what they can do in their job and, at the same time, are very sensitive to the human encounter with service users in need. However, they find it hard to deal with these tensions within their given mandate and the question as to how to cope with these difficulties becomes their own and personal business. It seems that the only real possibility practitioners have is to acquiesce to what the job is and to find a personal way and personal (and sometimes even hidden) strategies to go along with it in a way that remains somehow personally acceptable to them. Of course, these "personal solutions" can make a big difference for service users. One practitioner was very clear about that:

> It's every adviser's own business what he makes of it. To move oneself in this corset, because the parameters, the limits, are simply given. Not by us. It's what you make of it, that's why it makes a huge difference which adviser you get as service user. You can get a fully-motivated adviser, an ambitious one. You can also get someone who is despairing.

In fact, the frequent issue of finding one's own way of doing this job seems to be a very central aspect for all the frontline practitioners interviewed. All of them seem to be very keen to bring in their personality and to do their job in a humanly-acceptable way. However, the given representations suggest that these issues are hardly addressed within a professional discussion or integrated as a necessary and collective ethical reflection.

> No, basically, everybody knows these issues very well. We don't have to broadly discuss them or things like that. That's our daily reality. Of course, my boss also knows that it is like that. […] It's our daily bread.

These issues seem to reside in a rather secluded, private sphere of one's very own and personal concerns. Remarkably, the emphasis on these being personal concerns goes along very frequently with hints that very different ways to perform the job also exist.

> What is out of the question for me is to ever become such an asshole. The public servant who doesn't even look people in the eye anymore, who is rude and so on cliché. Should I ever get that far, and I do not exclude that, because I am not a saint at all, then I will definitely look for something else. I know that. Because I simply define my job this way. Because it makes me even more furious than my clients, if I ... I cannot say a lot about that, but there, well, there are some colleagues who don't have any manners, not at all. […] Like I said, I've found a way for myself, which has not been given to me by my boss or by my employer. That it becomes viable and acceptable for me. And I am nonetheless good at my job. I really can say that. In a way, that I can still face myself in the mirror in some way. That I can go home and find sleep anyway.

In some cases, practitioners make a clear juxtaposition between those who simply stick to the given rules without caring too much about human aspects and those who are more personally engaged, who try to see and to understand the individual person with his or her needs. At the same time, these practitioners admit that it might be easier for the former ones, while the more attentive ones continue to be torn between given provisions and their personal concern for a more "human" approach.

> Often it's not easy. Yes, there are colleagues who simply stick to the statutory provisions and who come off best with that. And then there are persons and colleagues who question a bit more what they are doing and who try to consider the human aspect, too. And yes, so, that's that. How can you yourself deal with that? And with some people this has a bearing on their own health. Because then you are simply all torn up inside.

One practitioner recalled that at the beginning of their AMS career, together with some colleagues, they made their own categorisation of people working at the AMS .

> We noticed somehow that there, I don't even know whether I should say that, that there are three types of people working at the AMS. There are those ones who do it because they come from the social sector and who hope to be effective with the young people, to bring them into employment and who maybe

> have their feelings of success in that. Then there are people working at the AMS who have always done that and who simply don't know what else to do. And then there are the people who maybe feel a sort of satisfaction if they can thump the table and say: "That's the way you have to do it!" Who somehow want to have this feeling of power.

Quite often, the risk of disregarding the human aspect is associated with the length of service and to an increasing blunting of feelings over the years.

> A lot of people have been working at the AMS for a long time, over 20 years. They have become dull in their feelings. Honestly, this has to be said. Hence, yes, maybe then they don't see the person anymore, but yes, I don't know, if you have already quit inside because at a certain point the job has annoyed you but you have not changed it, then you can perceive that in the interaction with service users.

As the quotes already show, the challenge to find one's own way is, on the one hand, associated with the personal concern for a certain mode of behaviour and interaction with service users. On the other, it is clearly associated with one's own need to make sense of the job and to survive in a way in it, too. Practitioners with a longer seniority at the AMS, especially, emphasise the need to get to grips with the challenges of the job in order to sustain it in the long term and to still see some point in what they are doing.

> For me it has always been important to find at least some meaning in what I am doing. This is still important for me. And this is partly difficult enough here. But you can still make something out of it, as adviser with commitment. […] As I've said, you need a high frustration tolerance in this job. Without that, you won't make it very far. And I've seen a lot of people coming and going. Really.

Practitioners with longer seniority are also able to witness changes in the given provisions and in the working conditions. In this context, practitioners report that nowadays there is a higher pressure to end the unemployment status of clients within a certain time and to perform in line with the given parameters and provisions. This means that it becomes more difficult to go deeper into the individual situation and, thus, to offer an individualised and

more comprehensive service. A practitioner who has been working in this job for a very long time (about 20 years) named this very clearly.

> When I arrived here, at the beginning, I mean, of course the goal always was to bring people into work. That's logical. That's our main task. But back then, the order was not that this one has to be in a job within three months and the other one has to be in a job within six months. It wasn't like that.

Another practitioner who has already been doing this job for a longer time (about 10 years), agreed that the difficulties have increased, too. Nonetheless, he points out, that for him the job has become easier, because he changed his views on certain aspects.

> I changed my mind as to certain issues. After my training year, I was quite close to burn out.

Practitioners were also asked how they would describe their job to an outsider who does not have insights into what it is about and what it means. Also in these responses the issue of help is at the heart of the given descriptions and the dimension of the interpersonal and helping relationship is depicted as being fundamental in this job. To commit oneself to service users' individual needs and to offer a proper individualised service is at the forefront of the given descriptions and it is also within this dimension that practitioners define success and satisfaction of what they are doing. However, here again, those who work with young people place more emphasis on these aspects.

> Most of the time, I say that I am working with very interesting young people, that I give them advice with regard to their professional future or their current professional situation. I say that it's a lot of fun to do that, that I see a lot and that it is a great experience for me!

> What I like about this job are, after all, the interpersonal relationships and the possibility to help—so to speak—other people. To show perspectives and to give support, to maybe point a different way or a new way, to dare something and to allow some change for themselves. Because sometimes that's one of the difficulties, too. Yes, to help, so to speak. I should rather call it support. With a

> huge offer of possibilities, additional support and institutions which are at our disposal. That's fun.

Some practitioners point out that they come in contact with very different people in very different situations, sometimes even with people in really problematic situations in which unemployment is only one and often even not the most pressing problem. They report many stories of this kind, where they had to consider the broader picture of a person's situation. Often they get to the real problems only by and by, when they see that the job search or attending training or qualification courses is not working. Sometimes, they understand only after a while that there are other underlying problems, e.g. housing problems, problems of mental health or addiction, the fact that a person cannot read and write or the fact that a person is living without electricity. In these cases, practitioners have to recognise that labour market integration or training are not primary goals and often even not realistic, at least in the short term. Practitioners emphasise that in such cases it is necessary to respect people's difficulties and not to demand things that are simply not possible. Thus, they underline that what you have to do is to pull the person somehow through without creating too many additional difficulties, and to try to put the person in contact with other services to get assistance. This is again represented more in terms of a rather personal concern and endeavour and less as an integral part of the professional mandate. Interestingly, at the same time, some practitioners depict this broader and more comprehensive approach and the multifaceted encounters with individually different situations as the interesting and, eventually, also the personally satisfying aspects of their job.

What emerges clearly is that working with people on the basis of a comprehensive approach and a helping relationship is at the heart of given practice representations. At the same time, this central aspect is often limited by the given rules practitioners have to follow. The need to cope with the resulting tensions and contradictions is, however, depicted predominantly as a challenge which risks falling back and being dealt with on a rather personal level. This can even bring about different representations of the job, a more official one and a more personal (or more hidden) one. Asked about the representations of the job to an outsider, one practitioner pointed out:

> If he is a very good friend of mine, I tell him the whole truth. My truth. My account of things. But generally you can put it like this: I nonetheless see myself as someone who can give support. Maybe not always the way the service users themselves want it, but in a way that still allows me to say it has been a kind of support. Within the limits of my possibilities.

This marginalisation of central challenges to an individualistic and more personal than professional sphere of finding one's own way is even more remarkable, as some practitioners are, at the same time, quite explicit about the structural nature of the conflicts they have to face. One aspect that emerged in this context concerns the double-faced nature of the AMS itself. On the one hand, it is represented as a user-oriented service provider, on the other, it is a public agency in charge of sovereign public functions, i.e. the implementation of unemployment insurance legislation and the exercise of the respective functions of control and sanction. In this sense, the AMS itself is represented as a rather ambiguous entity whose double-faced nature, eventually, unfolds in practice, especially in the interactions with those service users who are most disadvantaged in terms of their employability.

> Are we a public agency which is implementing statutory provisions and exercises sanctions and where your order is to stick them into a course for six months or to place them on the labour market? Or are we a service provider committed to our users and trying to do the best in their interests, or at least in the interests of all parties involved? I think the AMS doesn't even know itself what it is. Actually, we are a service provider with statutory character, but this is highly contradictory. If I cancel their benefits, I cannot claim to be a service provider. […] But I feel myself more as a service provider.

> What's a constant issue for me is this permanent tension. This schizophrenic situation between public agency and service provider. So what is required by statute can be accepted and understood by the service users. Needless to say, you have to inform them about that. But information needs time. And there we have the next problem. To inform a service user unhurriedly about what we have to do and about what his or her duties and rights are and, at the same time, be service oriented and customer friendly. […] That's always a difficult

> balancing act we have to carry out. And very often we cannot even accomplish that.

One practitioner stated that, in the end, people do not really have any choice and that the practice of activation is often characterised, at least to some extent, by a coercive context.

> They cannot go somewhere else. There's just the AMS. To get the benefit, unemployment benefit, unemployment assistance (Notstandshilfe) and even social assistance, I have to go to the AMS. There's simply no voluntary basis. At the same time, it is defined, even legislation speaks about voluntary registration, voluntary access, no compulsion and so on. But yes, you are always caught between two stools. That's it, every day. And you cannot even learn that. It can't be grasped in any training you get. You learn that painfully.

The AMS itself emphasises its service orientation, not only in its official representations towards the public, but also by placing great importance on the results of its Client Monitoring System, which are part of the definition of the corporate goals and integrated in the Balanced Score Card on which the different local offices are assessed by the controlling system. This is seen rather skeptically by the practitioners, who perceive the structural contradictions as a constant tension in their daily practice.

> What is given a huge weight by now, are the CMS results. This Client Monitoring System by which customer satisfaction is assessed. It goes so far as to come into the Balanced Score Card on the basis of which premiums (Leistungsprämien) are even given to single offices. Thus, schizophrenic! To improve customer satisfaction, but doing your job as statutory agency. Often this doesn't go together. There are statutory laws we simply have to execute. It's obvious that I do not increase customer satisfaction if I block someone's benefits. Or if I don't satisfy someone's qualification aspirations. Because often they simply cannot do that. […] It's quite difficult to increase customer satisfaction then.

Practitioners' answers show that the ambiguities and contradictions of activation eventually are played out on the concrete level of practice and in the

direct interaction with service users. The given accounts suggest that the demanding and the enabling dimension of activation policies, as well as the double-faced nature of the institutions for their implementation, constitute a field of tension in which practice has to be positioned. What is quite striking is that these challenges are mainly depicted as a personal effort of getting along and finding one's own way in this job. Although practice representations emphasise the issues of help and support and the helping relationship with service users, they also suggest that this dimension is clearly associated with a rather private sphere of personal concerns than with a professional strategy and that it often conflicts with the given provisions and rules. Such conflicts and tensions are perceived as the daily bread of practice and as personally challenging. The need to cope with them still remains present, however, at the level of a personal challenge. In this sense, it turns out that the mechanisms of individualisation and personalisation are also affecting practitioners themselves and exposing them to a precarious form of self-reliance in their job. In a debate on the professionalisation of "activation work", this problematic aspect should be seriously taken into account.

4.1.2 "I want to bring as many as possible into employment…" The orientation towards work and the interpretations of activation

Activation strategies have become the linchpin in labour market and social policy reforms all over Europe and the reorganisation and offer of public employment services are given high priority on the policy agenda. But what are the orientations of the practitioners who are placed on the frontline of activation services and who are concerned concretely, and as has been pointed out, very personally, with the labour market integration of unemployed people and with improving their scarce employability due to long-term unemployment, poor skills or wider personal problems? How is this mandate to overcome individual barriers to employment and the orientation towards work contextualised by frontline practitioners, and which interpretations of the notion of activation go along with their understanding of what they are doing on the frontline of activation services?

4.1.2.1 The orientation towards work

The findings suggest that, in principle, frontline practitioners agree on the priority given to paid work as primary means of social participation and social security and on respective policy strategies. In this sense, practitioners seem to agree on general policy goals and to identify themselves with their institutional mandate. This general consent might be considered as rather obvious, because the idea of activation seems to be, at least on the level of discourses, in line with existing ideas about responsibility and reciprocity in society. Furthermore, it can be taken for granted that people who work as frontline practitioners in public services do or even have to at least to a certain extent agree to the main normative ideas which are constitutive for the given policy and practice context. In fact, all interviewed practitioners frame their representations in a way which shows that they agree, in principle, on what they have, eventually, also to stand for at the frontline. One practitioner made this explicit:

> I want to bring into employment as many as possible. That's even my goal and I am doing what I can for that. I cannot do more than that. […]. But what I can do I do. And thus I don't feel under pressure. Because I have the same goals for myself and that's what I am working for all the time. […] I don't know if it's like this for everyone, I don't think so, but I believe that my views and opinions correspond with those of the AMS. I already knew that before I started working here. That they are fitting well, yes, maybe not a hundred percent, but it's ok.

However, frontline practitioners see most directly and in person critical aspects and limits of activation strategies and experience them as limits of what they can do in their daily interactions with service users. As already shown, these aspects come out prevalently in relation to difficult situations or stories of service users with fewer chances and possibilities for labour market integration. This does not mean that practitioners define problems only as individual problems and neglect structural aspects. They do refer to changing conditions on the labour market, to the difficulties of certain branches and regions as well as the disappearance of certain types of jobs. However, these remarks remain mainly related to the sphere of difficulties as individual experiences, both by service users and by practitioners themselves, rather

than being associated with a critical discussion of policy aims and strategies in a broader sense. While knowledge about structural problems is present, it seems to stay rather in the background. Here it could be argued that this is due to the fact that policy is perceived as given and challenges practitioners have to deal with in practice are concrete real life problems of persons in different situations. However, it is also in practice that the divergence between pretence and reality eventually arises, that policy goals reveal themselves as not realistic in relation to certain target groups or situations and that, in the end, practitioners cannot perform according to the projected outputs. The findings suggest though that the handling of these divergences and tensions barely takes place in terms of a politicisation of practice and on the level of collective action. Getting along with these critical aspects is confined to the practitioner-user relationship and, as has been pointed out already, even within this dimension there is limited space for a professional regime and a high risk that the handling of difficulties and tensions eventually fall back on the level of a rather personal concern. On the one hand, this "human", but actually rather "private" engagement might be considered a very positive element and in fact, all the interviewed practitioners are definitely keen to give "their" best in this job. On the other hand, and from a more critical point of view, this involves problematic aspects as well. First of all, this "personalisation" of frontline practice could be more at risk of legitimising debatable political strategies and the concealment of power structures by giving them a "human face" and by compensating policy contradictions with personal dedication. Furthermore, this leads to the quite contradictory situation of practitioners being officially hardly seen and heard (and often not even considering themselves) an active part in the policy implementation chain. At the same time, the dimension of streetlevel interaction seems to be a decisive dimension and a crucial moment for the concretisation of processes of inclusion or exclusion, while the challenges of "getting the job done" are rarely dealt with openly and within a professional domain. They remain, in contrast , rather marginalised in relation to a dimension of personal (and often even hidden) endeavour. Against this background, it can be understood that difficulties as individual experiences of both service users and practitioners stand at the forefront of representations. In fact, difficulties are rarely depicted as problematic policy aspects or linked with questioning the general narratives of

the activation paradigm. Issues such as the narrow conception of work as only paid work in the (first) labour market, the possibility and reasonability of the general extension of an ideal-typical universal adult worker model to very different target groups, and the general assumption that people have to be "activated" to work, are rarely touched and basically hardly questioned by frontline practitioners. What practitioners often stress is that with certain target groups it is quite impossible to accomplish the policy goal of labour market integration, particularly within the given time limits. This critique is made prevalently in relation to social assistance recipients who have to comply with compulsory registration at the public employment service and who are often perceived as having multiple difficulties, as hard to place or as the furthest from the labour market. However, practitioners depict critical aspects in this regard, mainly as "practical" difficulties of working with the furthest from the labour market with the given instruments and within the given time limits, pointing out the divergence between general policy goals and what is effectively possible in practice.

> I'd rather say that the target group of minimum income recipients is so difficult that you cannot realistically assume that they are in the right place here at the AMS. As I've already said before, there another organisation would be needed. It's particularly difficult to work with them in a goal-compliant way. They cost us a lot of time and they cause a lot of friction, as they are not even used to having a daily routine, for 10 or 20 years. […] They are definitely not placeable or able to be assisted by us, with the instruments we have.

Often the replies focus mainly on the difficulties of target groups and their wrong understandings of what being registered at the AMS means rather than on the difficulties inherent to the policy itself and its basic assumptions, which turn out to be problematic in practice.

> It's a very particular clientele, yes, social assistance recipients. […] They very often have serious limits. […] There you have to inform the users immediately what the real matter of our daily job here is. What we have to do. I often had customers where I said: "Sorry, we have to sign you off. You cannot actually be allocated. You are not available for the labour market, for the AMS."

> It's defined by law how long they have to be available for the labour market. Where then often comes the question: "Oh, great, and what shall I do now?! Where can I get my money?" Thus, a completely different understanding. Where I have to remind them that it's actually about ending unemployment, not about securing one's livelihood. Yes, we are doing that, too. But only on the way to employment. Actually, customers could be registered at the AMS only if it is in fact possible for the AMS to end unemployment.

The divergence between the pretence of labour market integration and the difficulties many people have to face in practice is comes out also in relation to other target groups with different problems such as health or addiction problems or people released from prison. The interviews are full of references to such stories showing the persistent dilemmas frontline practitioners have to face. On the one hand, they are supposed (and keen themselves) to take into account individual situations and needs and to be flexible and responsive for an individualised service provision. On the other hand, they have to process people within the limits of a given time schedule and of given rules and they have to head always towards the same goal, i.e. to end unemployment as soon as possible and to bring people (back) into the first labour market. But as practitioners point out, a narrow orientation towards employment in the first labour market is often simply not possible.

> Those who continue to stay here are those who have addiction problems, and that's quite a big group also among young people, those who have been in prison. And there it's difficult. These are the groups who are stuck here. And to speak with them about training, you know, especially with people who are on substitution treatment, that's impossible. […] There are people who are simply not fit for it, where I have to say, ok if they attend their appointments and stick somehow to the rules, at the beginning that's ok for me. And then, slowly you can ask more. Yes, in these cases, I cannot speak about training. I can talk with them, I can say: "Ok, it's good that you are here now, how's it going?" If they are getting worse, I can encourage them to make a withdrawal, a residential detoxification. If afterwards it works, if they don't relapse, then you can speak about work, start to search. But at the beginning… That's it.

> But which employer takes on someone with serious addiction problems? […] We have people with drug addiction problems who haven't got any… Also people who are clean, who made it, they still haven't got any chance in society. Or someone who has been in prison. If he served his sentence, he even could be the best person ever now, if his reputation is not ok, he hasn't got any chance at all, right?

The problem of not being "job ready" (to use the common terminology) does not only concern people considered the furthest from the labour market or people with serious health and social problems. As pointed out by practitioners working in the special office for young people, many of them who come to the counselling zone are far from being job ready and, thus, the real challenge is to lay the proper groundwork.

> I would say that the young people who are registered here are rather the ones who are having troubles in some way. Not necessarily something really urgent, but I would say that from those I have in mind now, there are maybe two or three out of ten where I would say right away that they are job ready. […] I don't have a lot of work with those who are job ready. They don't even come to mind when I am talking here with you.

> I'd say that cases where you have previous problems which have to be solved first are the majority and not the exception. Apart from the fact that the counselling zone is the catchment basin for those who are difficult to place. Those who are job ready, who have successfully finished their vocational training and where it's only about finding a job, they come to the service zone and they do not even arrive here.

> Because we have lots of people here who are not really job ready. To whom you can say: "Here you go." But there's a lot of groundwork to do. They have to be oriented, to be coached, there are lots of things they have to get a grip on beforehand.

The findings show that, despite the many difficulties in practice, practitioners rarely problematise them in a broader policy context. They seem to share in principle the basic policy ideas and in this sense also the narrow focus of

orientation towards gainful work in the first labour market, even though they directly experience the critical aspects and indeed the limits of such a narrow approach. The basic normative patterns of the activation paradigm are not really questioned and also references to alternative possibilities of occupational integration outside the first labour market are fairly rare.

However, the interpretations of the concept of activation that emerge from the replies and in relation to given target groups and problems are interesting. These different orientation patterns differ along a continuum and depend on how target groups and individual situations are seen and constructed.

4.1.2.2 Activation as qualification

A first interpretation pattern can be labelled as qualification. Mainly in relation to young people or to people who are seen as highly motivated, practitioners underline the importance of offering and supporting possibilities of acquiring qualifications in order to enhance service users' chances for stable labour market integration and better employment. In this interpretation pattern, the emphasis is on an individualised service, taking into account individual dispositions and aspirations and understanding in which direction an individualised project of support should be developed. It is mainly within this interpretation pattern that practitioners identify a dimension of professional expertise, which is represented as understanding individual needs and dispositions and as being able to respond with an appropriate match and a concrete offer of enabling support that can pay off on the labour market in the future. In this context, practitioners also stress the broad variety of courses and qualification measures which can be both offered by the AMS itself or bought in by different training providers, especially for specific target groups such as young people or women who want to re-enter the labour market.

> The offer we have here in Vienna is incredible. For me that's so positive because you can really be individually responsive. So you don't have to send them on just any job application course, maybe for five times, but you can really say: "Ok, these are his affinities and inclinations, that's still missing, there

> we can hook into, here we have an offer which fits in well". And then this helps him on.

> Yes, it's definitely offered a lot for young people. And that's good and right like this. Just as for women who want to re-enter the labour market or for women in general.

However, what is often criticised in this context is that the labour market does not offer enough apprenticeship positions for young people. So the priority on targeting qualifications is often hampered by the limited training positions available on the labour market. By contrast, what is seen as a very positive offer, is the possibility of special intensive vocational training courses (*Facharbeiterintensivausbildungen*) which allows unskilled workers to catch up on a skilled labour qualification within a compacted time span.

Within this orientation pattern of qualification, a central feature of practitioners' expertise is seen in having a good overview and knowledge about the range of services, courses and qualification measures on offer in order to give a fitting response to service users. Practitioners see their professional task in making a proper assessment of individual needs, inclinations and aspirations in order to offer tailor-made support which pays off in the future. In this context, especially in relation to young people, they emphasise the importance of orientation and career guidance as young people often have limited knowledge about labour market conditions and development and about which professional sectors offer good chances of employment. They also report that, very often, young people, especially those without a higher education background, have limited imagination about their professional future, and that they often continue to be oriented towards very classical and stereotypically gender-related career aspirations. In these cases, practitioners try to orient young people also towards alternative options, to show them the variety of possibilities and to understand with them in which direction they could go in order to realise somehow their aspirations and talents on the one hand, and to have a chance of finding a job on the other.

> It's a pity that many youngsters either don't have any idea at all or have only very restricted information about which jobs exist, which schools exist and

> which chances you have once you finished them. Of course, nobody can guarantee a hundred percent that I will get a job, even if I study. […] I don't know if you can change that, but it's like this, hairdresser, sales girl, secretary, these are the jobs for the girls. And I think that there would be a lot of other jobs which they would be well suited to. But they are afraid in some way, they don't dare do to that. […] Yes, I often use the FiT programme [Women in Technology]. Only the word technology sparks panic, they widen their eyes in horror. Really!
>
> We have this kind of blacklist, I mean it's not black, because it's not generally forbidden, but every year which training programmes have been paid and which of them ended in employment is evaluated. And there is a list of jobs we cannot sponsor, ambulance driver, nail designer, beautician, these dream jobs, kindergarten nurse. I don't know, lots of young women want to become kindergarten nurses, and the boys fitness coaches. But the situation on the job market is so bad that they probably wouldn't get a job after their training.

However, while in relation to young people, practitioners emphasise the importance of training and the priority to catch up on a marketable qualification, in relation to adult people there seem to be many more restrictions. Those who work with adult target groups point out that they often cannot satisfy the aspirations of service users, either because they cannot be considered as marketable or because they simply have to follow the proceedings for bringing the unemployed into a job as soon as possible, also against the will of service users.

> Last week, for instance, I had a customer who is a qualified cook and waiter, who had already worked as executive chef. […] He is perfectly qualified, for sure, but he said that he cannot stand being in the kitchen one more day. And that he, actually, wants to be a photographer. And he was already very well informed. It wasn't just an unrealistic desire. He would have been absolutely willing to do that, to invest money, etc. But it gets difficult for me. If you know just a bit the labour market and the labour demand and so. That doesn't go together with what I have to do. And I have to say to him: "Listen, that's all well and good, but I am going to place you anyway as a cook or as waiter." […]

> This is a customer's desire which has nothing to do with the economic-political mandate we have.
>
> First of all, after 100 days of registration, this occupational protection [*Berufsschutz*] runs out. Yes, then it actually says: active placement in every reasonable work field. And reasonable is, very simply, everything which is paid according to collective agreements and what doesn't infringe on one's health and offend morality.
>
> In principle, we actually have to verify if a registration is possible. If the person is unemployed, in the classical sense. The definition of unemployed is exactly like this: Unemployed is anyone who has no job, who is living in Austria, who can work, is available and willing to work. So we often have a problem, as our primary task is, actually, to end unemployment as soon as possible. That's our primary mandate. This often leads to situations, which I can fully understand from a human point of view, where users come and say: "I know, I haven't finished any education or training and my chances on the labour market are not the best, but I simply cannot do certain things. I can't hack it to just stand in an assembly line or to clean toilets or whatever, I don't know, to fill the shelves at Billa's. I expected more from my life."

Qualification seems to be a central interpretation pattern in activation work. In this context, practitioners assume the role of brokers, who have to make a good assessment of service users' situations and abilities and to bring them together with the right qualification measures that are supposed to pay off in future. Practitioners seem to highly identify themselves with this role and mostly attach to this dimension the competences needed and the "artistry" of their job. However, this focus and the strong orientation towards qualifications might carry also the risk of investing mainly in those target groups who are supposed to be the most promising ones and thereby of abetting creaming effects in activation work. Furthermore, the goal of ending individual unemployment periods as soon as possible often conflicts with service users' aspirations for qualification.

4.1.2.3 Activation as motivation

A second interpretation pattern identified can be labelled as motivation. In this pattern, the main focus lies less on the right qualifications but rather on stimulating the right personal attitudes and basic transversal skills and competences required for work and labour market integration. However, motivation is still represented in a rather positive way, as empowerment and supporting stimulus to familiarise service users with a working life. This pattern emerges mainly in relation to service users who have never worked before, such as young people, or service users who were outside the labour market for a certain time but who are predicted to make it if they learn to adapt themselves to basic requirements of gainful employment. Within this interpretation pattern, emphasis is placed mainly on a supporting relationship, while more concrete aspects of a qualification or career planning process remain, at least initially, in the background. The activating role of practitioners is often seen in getting people to adopt a daily routine, to encourage them and to make them realise that the effort of searching for a job or starting a training course can offer new perspectives, even in a broader sense, enhancing autonomy and well-being.

> The device is to fire them up time and again. To motivate. But yes, sometimes even with a wagging finger. […] Unfortunately, one of the difficulties is that many of them can live with social assistance or with the little money they get from us. So they don't see an incentive. Then you have to tell them that now they get this small sum of money 12 times [a year]. If they go to work, they get it 14 times. Yes. Aren't there any aims and ambitions? To travel, to have a car, hobbies? What you cannot afford to do now? Yeah, often you have to do it like this.

Especially in relation to young people there seems to be a strong link between a more qualification and motivation-oriented interpretation pattern. In fact, as a practitioner in the special office for young people points out, also in special vocational training courses (*überbetriebliche Lehrausbildung*), the first steps often consist prevalently in motivational efforts in order to guide the young people in the right direction.

> Actually, often it is rather a starting shot. That they, how shall I say, that they get a daily routine. That they have to go there, so that they get up in the morning and it was like going to work. Basically, it is like going to work. In these trainings they sign an apprenticeship contract and have the same rights and duties as an apprentice, vocational training school included. And for many of them it's just this first step. Then they look for an apprenticeship position on the labour market, to which they can switch over. Often it is just about starting with something. I can badly describe that… That you say: "Yes, now there is something for you. Here you go!" To make a first step outside the front door. And then the next steps go automatically. And then it works also with finding an apprenticeship position. To get out of this lethargy. […] Yes, to shove them and so. Some of them need this. There are those who come and who are full of vim and energy and everything goes smoothly, and then there are those who need someone, who says: "Come on!", who pushes them again and again.

It is mainly in relation to the target group of young people that the importance of motivation is emphasised. Practitioners have to show "how the wind blows" and so they represent their motivational role also as giving some kicks from time to time. However, although even strong expressions are sometimes used in these answers, the motivation pattern is distinguished by an encouraging tenor and strong emphasis on a supporting relationship.

> Of course sometimes I even say: "You really need a kick in your ass every morning, or to splash your face with cold water to get you moving!" But they can take that. In fact, I don't have a lot of stress with that, thank God!

However, practitioners are also aware that motivation has its limits. Often especially young people have ideas or aspirations which cannot realistically be achieved with the given qualifications and skills. In these cases, practitioners describe their task also as downsizing them, as making them realise that certain aspirations are not reasonable or simply not possible.

> Sometimes activation is also manipulation. That's just how it is. […] This is really a very delicate point. Because my approach is basically the one of positive endorsement. But when someone is sitting here and he or she was in the lowest

> ability group [*Leistungsgruppe*] at lower secondary school [*Hauptschule*] or at technical school with only fours [lowest grade] and wants to become pharmaceutical assistant at the chemist's, you know, or to work in an office. Then I would have to say: "Hello, wake up! No way! Never ever! Your grades are too bad for that." And that's hard for me… this is often frustrating, I think, when you almost have to demotivate people.

In some cases, it can be rather problematic or even cynical to motivate people to do something which probably will not happen. Furthermore, practitioners point out that their motivational efforts can be immediately destroyed when people get in contact with the harsh reality of the labour market.

> Who takes these people? What shall I do to make them not lose their motivation? I've had a customer now, he went to a job interview and they told him that he was a lost cause! I felt sick! I've had him as my customer for a few months and we've been looking, he found his own apartment in the meantime, he is really looking for a job, he shows me his own initiative. He goes, he makes applications by himself. He has a big robbery behind him. But that's in the past. Now we have to build something new. And he is trying to set up something, he applies for a job and the person in front of him says: "No. You are a lost cause, go and speak with your counsellor." And I stand here and I get so furious because I think that it cannot be like this! All the work, the effort I made is fucked up, so that it cannot work. Because that's enough sometimes. In this case I've tried to put that aside and to tell him that I have the feeling that it is not like this. And I pointed out to him what he had been able to achieve since I knew him. I hope it was useful!

The findings show that motivation constitutes a central feature of activation work and that practitioners strongly identify with the role of giving motivational support and of encouraging and empowering people in finding their way to employment. Especially in relation to certain target groups such as young people, motivation is seen as an important dimension and a lot of resources are dedicated to pointing them in the right direction and to equipping them with the right attitudes and dispositions for working life. However, also in this orientation pattern the frame of reference is a rather individ-

ualistic one, namely the one of individual success, of making the individual fit for work under the conditions of the given labour market. Thus, the focus is on the individual with his or her motivations and his or her efforts to work on them. Of course, this is pivotal in direct interaction with service users. The problem is that, in the end, individual success depends on more than a motivated self with the right attitudes and skills. Practitioners clearly indicate that they are aware of the risk that their motivational efforts can easily go nowhere or be cancelled out very quickly by the real conditions on the labour market. Thus, practitioners need to find the difficult balance between motivating people and being at the same time realistic without raising hopes about something which won't happen. This tension lies at the heart of activation work, but it rather fails to be contemplated both in the officially proclaimed service orientation of the Public Employment Service and in the given frame of reference and action of frontline practice. This way, activation work understood and represented in the positive way of motivational support risks becoming part of a functional strategy of subjectification without taking into account structural constraints. What is problematic, here again, is that there seems to be very limited possibilities for a reflexive handling of these critical aspects within the realm of practitioners' professional role and that it falls back instead on their very private sense of appropriateness in dealing with these difficulties and on avoiding escapist scenarios of unrealistically or even cynically motivating people with little chances on the labour market.

4.1.2.4 Activation as disciplinary measure

A third interpretation pattern reflects activation as a disciplinary measure. An inevitable dimension of activation work in practice is defined also by tasks of control and sanction in a stricter regime of services and benefits. It is, thus, part of frontline practice to check that people stick to the rules and to block the payment of benefits, if necessary.

Generally, all the interviewed practitioners present the tasks of control and sanction as difficult aspects of their work which they rather try to avoid. In fact, it does not seem to be a dimension practitioners strongly identify with and refer to in depicting their job. Practitioners point out instead that these tasks are a necessary evil of this job, which often creates conflicts both on a personal level and in the interaction with service users. Additionally, they

criticize that this structural conflict is not addressed officially by the Public Employment Service with its emphasis on service orientation. The demanding dimension of activation, which includes controls and sanctions, according to practitioners remains rather hidden in official statements so that it is left to them to clarify what registering at the AMS is about in terms of rights and duties and what happens if people do not stick to the rules.

> I try everything else before imposing a sanction. […] It's not fun for me to impose these sanctions. It's really the last thing for me, to show: "You can go this far, but no further! You are also self-responsible!".

> So that is what we have to do. That's part of our job as advisers at the AMS, to also impose sanctions, if necessary.

In this context, the character of street-level bureaucracies becomes evident. On the one hand, practitioners point out their responsibility of public administration and the legal basis which precisely regulates the regime of benefits and sanctions. On the other hand, the findings suggest that, beyond the given regulations, practitioners still find margins of discretion and can decisively influence the handling of control and sanctions. They have to find their own way of dealing with this part of the job.

> I mean, I see myself as an executing person, I am working according to a legal framework, which I cannot change just because I'd feel like doing it, but I have my fixed requirements. Yes, and it works out quite well, the customers do understand that, that there's really a legal basis and that it's not the individual adviser who is arbitrarily good or bad.

> In the past, I've also tried to sanction as little as possible. One colleague next to me, who I trained two years ago, is still doing it like this. She's looking to avoid every possible sanction, to cop out just because it's unpleasant to her. Which I can understand. But you simply have to find your own recipe for yourself, so that you can live with it. It's nonetheless part of our function. And she is anyway getting her money for it, that she does it and executes the law. […] Recently a colleague told me that he hadn't done anything because there was such a poor woman, a lonely mother with two kids. I asked him: "M., had she been

> informed what the rules are?", and he: "Yes, she had been informed.", I said: "Then she took the money away by herself. Not you!" That's it. I am not going to enhance self-responsibility if I make allowances for everything, if I always bend the rules. That's sure.

What is interesting is how the interviewees differ in their responses in relation to their room for manoeuvre and their discretional power. At first, some practitioners stress that there are clear legal, which define for instance what constitutes legitimate reasons for not attending an appointment or for the relief of a sanction.

> It's defined very clearly. The costumer can see it as he likes, but it's simple, a just reason for not attending an appointment is, very clearly, if I am sick, if I have a job interview, if I have a hearing in a court trial, things I can prove. If I was on care leave, because my child was sick. I can prove that, too.

However, sooner or later, all the interviewed practitioners disclose that, in practice, things are never as bad as they seem and that they do have margins of discretion and power to influence what is eventually carried out. The interesting aspect is practitioners' arguments in this respect. All of them emphasise that they sometimes have to take into account whether a person is in a difficult situation and what the freezing of benefits means in a given situation. However, there seem to be different strategies for handling these situations and different arguments in legitimating and accounting for sanctioning behaviour. These strategies and arguments change depending on the severity of the situation, on the previous case history and on other aspects which might determine the decision making in a specific moment. Generally two main argumentation patterns can be distinguished. A first pattern is more professional and claims that this kind of discretion is an important feature of doing a good job, which sometimes can simply require making an exception, giving a second chance and avoiding imposing a sanction, for instance. These strategies seem to be more open and to reflect a more advocacy-oriented approach. Practitioners emphasise the importance of being transparent, of documenting accurately what happened, but, at the same time, of advocating openly the interest of the service user. A second argumentation pattern, in

contrast, points more to the level of a personal commitment to avoiding excessive harm to extremely vulnerable people. In this argumentation, pattern strategies are depicted as rather clandestine, as tacitly bending the rules, as turning a blind eye, or as very rare and undocumented exceptions made in extreme situations.

> Of course, there are statutory provisions, but basically, after all, it's the case that every adviser works a bit differently. And that's, essentially, the good in it, because every person, every customer, comes from a different background. And if someone, I just had a young man and his father suffered a stroke. And he was completely drained and dropped out of his course. I would never punish him, additionally, right? Thus, as adviser I have my freedoms. Of course I have to justify and to document it, but really, you have your freedoms.

> Yes, it's insofar possible to bend the rules, when the customer is willing but couldn't manage to do something, or he hadn't understood or known something. Then we say sometimes: "Ok, we excuse that now, but for the next time we firmly agree that..."[…] I can always legitimate it. I can always justify it because I say that everyone deserves a second chance. Very simply. And indeed, I justify it in this way.

> I just can inform them about what is written in the statutory provisions. Anyway, that's again something which is, actually, never as bad as it seems. If then, I, as adviser, can cushion that somehow, I try do that. […] Well, I don't have to document necessarily, that I hit on it, that, actually, something went wrong. But I really do that only in case of hardship. Extremely exceptional cases.

Another very interesting aspect is how frontline practitioners contextualise the dimension of disciplinary action in their job. As mentioned, practitioners sometimes make use of their discretional power and of their room for manoeuvre to cushion or to avoid punitive action. At the same time, practitioners agree on a concept of activation aimed at strengthening people in their self-responsibility and self-initiative. This links to an orientation pattern of activation as disciplinary action, although the emphasis on it differs greatly depending on the target groups concerned or on distinctions made between

those who are considered as active and cooperative and those who are seen as inactive and uncooperative.

With respect to young people, a softer approach seems to prevail, where the dimension of disciplinary action remains more in the background or is, at least, represented in a softer way and as motivational strategy. Practitioners from the special office for young people underline that, in comparison to colleagues who work with adult target groups, they are much more permissive and tolerant. They emphasise the importance of a more pedagogical approach which leads young people gradually to self-responsibility. Younger service users have to be assisted in their very first transition into work and, accordingly, are seen as still having to find the right direction or to find or catch up a marketable qualification. Additionally, young people often get neither unemployment benefits (as they have not matured any entitlements yet), nor social assistance (as they are often still living at the expense of their parents).

> Especially with those youngsters who don't get benefits. Or also compared to adult target groups. We are overlooking much more, giving more chances. […] I mean you have to impose a paragraph 10 at a certain point, that's when they do not attend or drop out of their courses, when they don't show any self-initiative at all. That happens here, too. But I really think that we are overlooking much more. But that's necessary, it's a different age.

> They have to learn to be self-responsible. Exactly. And before you haven't led them to be it, you shouldn't demand it. So you tell them what they have to bring and try to agree on that. And if it doesn't work the first time… That's why I say, I am a bit, I take care they have learnt it, first of all.

The situation seems to be, quite different in relation to adult target groups aged over 21 years. The findings suggest that, in relation to them, the interpretation of activation as disciplinary action is more pronounced and that the functions of control and sanction are much more present in daily frontline practice. Although practitioners tend to identify themselves with more positive orientation patterns, they frankly acknowledge that they also have to exercise public authority and to carry out regulatory functions. In this context,

practitioners emphasise the importance of giving clear information on the rights and duties of service users right from the beginning.

> For me that's a key moment in the counselling process. That the customer gets well informed. That needs time. That's just how it is. […] To explain certain things, that simply needs time. And now imagine that someone who doesn't even speak reasonable German, not to mention of having a clue about certain laws or what has to be done accordingly is sitting here.

> I've accustomed myself to addressing that again and again with folks. To remind them consistently that they are not only entitled to get benefits, but that this is also linked with duties. And that's what I think is a pity for us as advisers, that we have so little time. Because it's not that easy to compress that into ten minutes.

In this respect, practitioners underline also the importance of the support agreement which is made with every service user individually and which contains a written record of the aims and steps to be taken as well as of deadlines and reporting requirements. This agreement in the form of a written and signed contract between the AMS and the service user is seen as an important element for the service provision relationship and for the clear communication of goals and duties and, hence, also as an important instrument of responsibilisation.

> I always say clear agreements set clear limits. That's very very important.

> Everything we agree is written down. That's the so-called support agreement which is made for the first three months. We write down what has been agreed, the preliminary situation maybe, possible health restrictions, maybe the aspirations for professional orientation or qualification. And, additionally, we also record the reporting requirements, so that they are contained also in the support agreement. That they have to attend their control appointments.

However, although practitioners emphasise the importance of clear legal instructions, of explaining to service users their rights and duties and of a written support agreement also in order to prevent the need for imposing sanctioning measures, the dimension of exercising disciplinary action is seen as

part of their job and they have to face situations in which they have to stop services and freeze benefits. Despite the allusions to given rules, practitioners take the individual situation of service users and the possible effects of sanctions into account and, thus, differentiate also in their use of discretion and in their decisions. What is emphasised in this regard is that it makes a huge difference whether the freezing of benefits causes difficulties in terms of existential living conditions or not.

> If you cancel the money for six weeks to the father of a family, it's a tragedy. If you cancel it to a 22-year-old who gets, I don't know, a skimpy three Euro per day and who gets paid everything anyway by his parents, there's a huge difference, of course. […] it's not that tragic as when I freeze the money to someone who has to pay rent or so.

> There are also those ones who have their jobs and who are registered here for social insurance reasons mainly. Those people who have built their shadow existences, who have their moonlighting incomes. They accept getting no money for six or eight weeks. They don't care a lot about this. They also need this time to do their jobs or whatsoever.

Thus, depending on the specific situation, practitioners experience different challenges in the function of control and sanction and the findings suggest that practitioners use discretion and strategies accordingly. When a situation is perceived as less difficult practitioners stress the educative and corrective value of disciplinary action. Different target groups also account for differences in the emphasis given to this orientation pattern. While practitioners working with young people of up to 21 years underline a more lenient approach, this seems to change in relation to adult target groups.

> In this regard, our patience doesn't last that long. Because we say, at the main working age, adult and responsible, insured jobs have to be given priority. Then you place them also in unskilled labour jobs. Also if someone doesn't get benefits. And if someone refuses such a job offer three times, then the registration is signed off. Actually, we throw them also out, so to speak. Yes, it's not that you can be registered here eternally.

The findings show that, in practice, activation means often also disciplinary action. In this regard, practitioners' interpretations are partly conflicting. On the one hand, they identify less with the demanding and controlling dimension of their job and they try to prevent or even avoid sanctioning, especially in situations of excessive harm. On the other hand, they point out the importance of responsibilising service users and the educative and corrective effects of disciplinary measures. Thus, they share, at least to some extent, the orientation pattern of activation as disciplinary action and as a means to constitute a responsible and "marketable self". Against the background that practitioners have room for discretion, but rely, at the same time, on a very individual way of getting along in their job, the interesting question is when the orientation towards disciplinary action comes to the fore. The findings suggest that the decisive element and justifying rationale is the distinction between those who are willing to cooperate and those who are not. Who is seen as trying to be self-responsible and actively keen in his or her endeavours for labour market integration is considered as deserving support and, even if something does not work as it should, a more indulgent approach, while disciplinary action is exercised on those who are considered inactive and not willing to push themselves forward into employment. This creates de facto a situation of suspicion towards service users considered as employable but who do not make it. This crucial distinction, made by frontline practitioners, emerges notably in regard to social assistance recipients. Although practitioners concede that many people of this target group have multiple limitations for effective employment, social assistance recipients seem at the same time to be most exposed to the general suspicion of being unwilling and preferring to rely on benefits. Although social assistance is paid by local welfare agencies, AMS frontline practitioners have a crucial role in assessing the willingness and, thus, deservingness of social assistance recipients. If social assistance recipients do not stick to the rules and perform according to the given limits, this is reported by the AMS to social welfare offices, which can cut social assistance benefits on the basis of the reported performance in active labour market integration attempts. Frontline practitioners in the AMS context are, thus, primarily involved in operating the distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" social assistance recipients and in exercising functions of gatekeeping and of avoiding social assistance abuse.

This key role of practitioners must be seen against the background of the fact that they possess remarkable discretional leeway beyond the given rules, but are, at the same time, heavily individualised in their decision-making processes. As shown, the way frontline practitioners carry out their job is determined by their personal interpretations and efforts and the findings suggest that frontline practice lacks a set of professional criteria for dealing with frontline challenges. This suggests that the space of mediation between statutory provisions given by formal policy goals and the individual situations of service users is scarcely filtered by a set of professional standards or collective ethical concerns, but instead is left to the individual adviser as his or her own business. This might be seen as unproblematic as long as frontline practitioners try to do their best and are able to mediate in a somehow acceptable manner between what has to be done and what the interests of service users are. But it shows the precarious situation that frontline practitioners themselves are exposed to. The implementation of activation policies, and, eventually, the relation between the state and its citizens and the realisation of citizenship, are shaped by these personally contingent micro-processes at the frontline of activation services. This does not mean, however, that practitioners are only acting arbitrarily according to their sets of beliefs, of course, they reflect policy ideas and, more generally, the normative patterns in society, which constitute the basic ideas on how the state as active force in the ordering of social relations has to act upon its citizens. The dilemmas in the normative framing of activation and the ambiguities of activating labour market policies are broken down to a practice context which offers little space for a politically-reflexive professionalism and relies instead on a dimension of interpersonal governance in which both practitioners and service users find themselves, eventually, in precarious situations of personal self-reliance, and, hence, in a situation which is rather concealed than articulated by the official slogan of individualised service provision.

However, although disciplinary action is part of frontline activation work, it must be pointed out that the interviewed practitioners seem keen not to wrong service users and to be cautious in their assessment of people. Furthermore, although they recognise that their job sometimes means also disciplinary action, they are rather reserved on its effectiveness. In the end, the important dimension and the success of their job seems to be located

elsewhere. What makes the difference seems to be in fact what practitioners make out of it and how they deal with the disciplinary authority given to them.

> I cannot do wrong to my customers!

> Sometimes you have to exercise pressure, sometimes you have to motivate. But I wouldn't say that most of the people who are registered here wouldn't be willing to work. You can't put it like this.

> You don't know what's going on inside them. Thus, for me it's no fun at all to exercise these sanctions.

4.1.2.5 Activation as the administration of the unemployed

Finally, the findings suggest that in some situations, activation clearly reaches its limits. This is the case in relation to those target groups who do not have any real chance of being integrated into the labour market. Despite different offers existing for those who are considered to be the least suited for the labour market, for instance in the form of transit solutions in non-profit social enterprises, practitioners state that there are also the "no hopers"; service users who don not have any realistic chance of being brought back into regular employment. As the various stories show, such people can belong to different target groups such as young people with heavy addiction problems, people with mental health problems, homeless people or people with multiple limitations to their prospect of labour market integration.

> Then you have a 22-year-old who has a serious drug addiction, for instance, what can you do? […] They haven't any chance at all!

People who do not have any realistic chance on the labour market still continue to be registered at the AMS and, as such, to be target of activation. Practitioners acknowledge that different supporting measures and low-threshold training programmes exist even for those with the least chances of access to the mainstream labour market, but at the same time they are very clear that

some people will continue to be cut out of the labour market although they are not considered unable to work, at least officially.

> In Austria, there is the possibility, at least till now, that customers can apply for a disability pension[39]. […] You must have accumulated a certain social insurance period and then the PVA [Pension Insurance Agency] can test if you are really not able to work anymore. But, by now, in order to save money, they are so restrictive that the common practice is to decline all these applications in the first instance. And then we get these customers back and there are so many of them who can realistically not be placed anywhere.
>
> I always call them stiffs, these customers, a bit cynically.

In such cases, practitioners are aware that activation, eventually, comes to nothing and they try to get service users somehow through without bending too many rules, but at the same time without continuing to push people too hard towards something which will not happen. But practitioners have to keep these service users moving, too, often for purely statistical purposes. Their priority is to prevent people passing over into the status of long-term unemployment. Placing even those furthest from the labour market into courses or training sessions interrupts their status of unemployment and is, thus, useful for preventing the statistical increase of long-term unemployment. In this sense, frontline practitioners also have an important function of producing the right statistics, or as two practitioners call it, of bringing together people and statistics instead of people and work.

> We should, this is also our slogan, bring together people and work.
> This doesn't happen anymore. It simply doesn't happen anymore.
>
> We bring together people and statistics.

However, the offers which can be made to these clients with little hope of labour market integration still remain strongly labour market-focused and references to alternative possibilities of being active or occupied outside the first

39 Called *Berufsunfähigkeitspension* for employees and *Erwerbsunfähigkeitspension* for the self-employed.

labour market are fairly rare. Hence, in these situations, activation work risks degenerating to a kind of simulation which continues to keep people moving without achieving clear aims.

> Yes, we continue to do what we have to do. To arrange courses and to continue to inform. Of course, there is the possibility that someone recovers. But we are not responsible for that. We are not doctors and we are not a therapy centre or such like. I often tell my customers: "Make sure you get fresh air and to do a lot of physical exercise!" But this is nothing curricular or part of a vademecum on how I am expected to do a counselling interview. In part, this is quite difficult. In the meantime, there are really a lot of clients where I know fairly certainly, or at least I think I know, that I won't place them anywhere.

Here again, the findings suggest that practice offers limited opportunities for dealing with these contradictions and limits of activation. Of course, on the micro-level of practice, solutions have to be found for individual situations, and practitioners on the frontline of services cannot be expected to solve structural problems. However, the question is if frontline activation work practice is still conceived as a social arena and, as such, as a place of mediation between public policy and the sphere of private needs, between given goals, provision and criteria and between what people—also those who are not able to perform in terms of (quick) labour market integration—need as (active) citizens. It makes a difference whether frontline practitioners are in the situation of performing their job in the spirit of a political practice intended to respond to social problems, or if they have to get along with it in the secluded dimension of a private response to individualised problems without making the link between private problems and public issues. These problematic aspects emerge most prominently with regard to those service users who are seen as having only very limited or even no realistic chances of performing according to set policy goals. At the same time, it could be argued that these situations constitute the acid test for frontline practice as a space for a politically-reflexive professional activity. The findings suggest that frontline activation work in the AMS does not allow for such an understanding of practice. Particularly in difficult situations, practitioners are divided in their activities between their public function (which sometimes risks degenerating

to the administration of no hopers) and their private pretence of giving, nevertheless, a response also to those who are cut out from the labour market.

In summary, even though practitioners directly experience contradictions and limits of activation, they share in principle its basic normative ideas and the strong focus towards gainful work and quick labour market integration. Thus, they rarely problematise difficulties within a broader context of questioning political strategies in a more fundamental way. However, it would be too easy to say that practitioners lack political awareness. Instead, the findings suggest that it is the conception of activation work itself and the conditions under which frontline practice has to be carried out which hinder frontline practitioners in critically challenging their job. In fact, given regulatory provisions and a strong concentration on a quantitative performance output in assessing the accomplishment of frontline work leave very limited space for a critical reflexive practice. This is reflected also in the different interpretations of the notion of activation emerging from practitioners' statements. The main point of reference is individual success in labour market integration and, accordingly, the given interpretations of what activation work is about differ depending on how promising, how fit and how active target groups are regarded to be in relation to this end. Activation is interpreted sometimes as offering suitable qualification measures, sometimes as motivating people to pursue the way to employment and sometimes also as exercising disciplinary action to push them in the right direction. Of course, practitioners seem to be aware of limits and risks, but these are presented as rather private concerns. The job is clearly defined to labour market integration and to the application of unemployment insurance legislation. What is done beyond (or sometimes, rather, hidden underneath) the given rules depends mainly on the individual practitioner, on his or her sensitivity and disposition to accommodate individual needs and situations. This emerges most strongly in relation to those service users who have the greatest difficulties in labour market integration. In these cases, activation work can easily be narrowed to the administration of the unemployed. What is done beyond as additional support or as a means

of harm reduction happens outside this official framework, as a personal effort, and less as part of the job itself.

4.1.3 How to be and to behave as a client: The social construction of service users and the practitioner – client relationship

As already mentioned, the findings show the crucial role of frontline practitioners in assessing clients and in operating distinctions and categorisations for further client processing. People come to the AMS as individuals, in a specific personal situation of unemployment, from different personal, social, economic and educational backgrounds, with different working and life experiences, with different abilities and skills and, thus, with different prospects in terms of employability. Frontline practitioners have to know who they are facing and where to attach an attempt of individual support and to find the different resources at their disposal. But the crucial moment of street-level encounter also has to be analysed as a process of social construction. This means conceiving client characteristics not (or at least not only) as given objective entities existing outside and independently from this encounter, but rather as results constructed within this process and on the basis of the criteria which shape this process. In other words, it is not just about who and how people are, but also about how people are seen and, indeed, made as clients by those who look at them and in relation to the ideas which underpin both political strategies and practical procedures of activation work.

The findings suggest that, in their views on clients, practitioners share a strong orientation towards the social investment logic of social policy. This emerges most prominently in relation to young people as target groups. They often find themselves still in their first attempts of labour market integration and generally particularly exposed to the risk of unemployment.[40] Furthermore, practitioners themselves view many young people as being far from job ready in an increasingly demanding labour market and as having to get to grips with different other aspects before they can be brought into training or employment. However, the general perspective adopted in looking at young people is distinguished by an optimistic and supportive approach and practi-

40 Seasonally-adjusted youth unemployment rate (population aged < 25) on January 31st 2018: 9,3 % in Austria and 32,2 % in Italy (EU-28 average 16,1 %) (EUROSTAT).

tioners emphasise that young people are a special target group both in terms of political interest and—in connection with that—as the most promising group to make investments pay off in the future.

> For me, it's the most fun working with young people, because there you can still do something. Actually, a lot of them untie the knot and absolutely want to do something and if you can help them in doing so , it's smashing.

> In the new secondary school, you know this new school model? […] This new focal point, starting from the second class, where they speak about jobs and careers has been introduced. […] The earlier the better. I think this is a good approach. You have to start there.

> For those under 25, it's not that problematic to finance the courses, I'd say. For older target groups that's much more difficult. But the under-25 target group is one of the main target groups in the AMS. Usually, there's quite a lot of money available for them, if they want to do something.

This is not to say that special attention towards young people would not be needed and that special measures for young people should not be given high priority in labour market policy. The point here is the adopted perspective in "constructing" clients. Although practitioners emphasise that they try to take into account specific situations and to respond to the individual persons, the findings suggest that, as street-level practitioners with little time at their disposal, they prevalently think in categories which serve as indicators of possible interventions and courses of action. This process of transforming an individual person into a client is connected with the way the context and processes of service provision are structured, how benefits and sanctions are, eventually, distributed, and how clients are expected to behave as such. The findings suggest very clearly, that it makes a difference whether a service user is associated with a more promising target group worth investing in or of a more problematic or suspect one. These differences consist not only in the way clients are "seen", but also in the way they are constructed and treated as well as in relation to what they are expected to do. This does not mean that practitioners do not take individuals into account enough or

that they let themselves be led by stereotypes. With their heavy case loads and the limited time resources, practitioners are, however, exposed to the classical conditions and dilemmas of street-level bureaucracies. Their job involves the built-in contradiction to be, on the one hand, responsive and to accordingly exercise discretion in relation to individual situations, while, on the other hand, they have to process people in terms of strict time schedules and given procedures. In this sense, the "making" of the client might be part of a necessary client-processing mentality street-level practitioners have to adopt if they want to persist in their jobs. However, the question is what the criteria and reference points for this processes of social construction consist of and on the basis of which strategies of assessment and screening client processing is operated. As emerges from the findings, the social construction of clients in activation work is determined by the ultimate goal of achieving individual success in labour market integration and by the chance that the investments in terms of services and benefits might pay off accordingly. Ultimately, frontline practitioners see and, indeed, construct and process service users in relation to their potential performance in labour market integration, i. e. according to how fit, how promising, how active and how willing service users are to get into employment. Of course, that is what practitioners have to look for in their jobs. However, the Public Employment Service is not just a private assessment centre or placement service. As has been shown, the activation paradigm as normative framework for welfare state intervention makes a stronger nexus between work and welfare and, as such, also between people's behaviour and performance in what they are expected to do for their effective labour market integration and their social rights as citizens. Against this background, the significance of the social construction of clients in activation services goes beyond a technical matter of accurate assessment and service delivery for effective job placement. In the end, the way that frontline practitioners construct clients also determines the way they are seen as citizens by the state more generally. This illustrates the political content of these micro-practices on the frontline of activation services and of the distinctions and categorisations operated by frontline staff. It is not only about knowing how to technically process different categories of service users, but it is about

how to activate citizens and, thus, how to shape concretely of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

> Yes, then it depends on the reaction. Whether he gives me the impression that he really wants to do something or not. Because some of them are living that pretty much way, that they, actually, do not have any interest at all. And others seem very willing and to be making an effort. And that's also the question then. Are they, actually, doing it or not? That's the interesting point for me.

Assessing people in the public employment service means assessing and indeed constructing clients in reference to the ideal of the active citizen which, ultimately, means being in employment and capable of providing for your own (and your own family's) social security and welfare through labour market participation. Furthermore, the processes of assessment and categorisation are crucial for opening up the sphere of the personal for public intervention, or to express it in more critical terms, for the government of people through subtle subjectification strategies and individualisation techniques. Looking at these processes through a critical lens does not mean denying that these processes are needed for the implementation of policies and for getting the job somehow done in practice, but helps to grasp the importance of these micro-processes in frontline work also in terms of how the state operates through these practices.

The ideal of the active citizen is indeed an important reference point in the representations practitioners give of their clients. What is striking, however, is that the non-correspondence to this normative idea of the active citizen is frequently connected with cultural explanations of unemployment and labour market exclusion, suggesting that structural explanations and questions of necessary preconditions for active citizenship remain rather in the background, at least when it comes to the representations of clients and their categorisations.

> I often say that it's since childhood, of course. It comes from their background, very clearly. Most of them for sure come from families where both the mother and the father were living on social assistance. And the dream of the child is,

> of course, also never to work and to be registered at the social welfare office eternally. We have these ones, too.
>
> It cannot be our job to assume an educational role for something that has been neglected for 20 or 25 years. We really reach our limits there. Much as we'd like to do that, that's not possible.

Within these processes of service user differentiation and categorization, different dynamics combine in terms of the allocation of responsibility. Identifying people as culturally predisposed, as inactive, unwilling or preferring to live on benefits means placing responsibility on the individual. Even though there might be clients who are indeed inactive and who do prefer to live on benefits, a general unilateral attribution of responsibility for unemployment on the individual is highly problematic, as it blanks out the context of the current labour market, of structural problems and, in the end, also of the effects of active labour market policy itself. The strategy of placing the responsibility on the individual might also work as a psychological coping strategy that somehow absolves frontline practitioners from realising service failures or from the actual impossibility of bringing more people into employment. Practitioners are generally rather cautious in their descriptions of service users and keen not to do them wrong. However, as frontline practitioners themselves are exposed to a precarious form of self-reliance and to performance pressures in this highly contradictory field, the risk of blaming the victim might easily arise.

Another important aspect in the social construction of clients consists of putting across to service users how they are expected to behave as clients and what they can, on their part, expect in terms of service provision. Of course, getting proper information must be acknowledged as a fundamental right of service users and as a basic principle for the establishment of the practitioner–client relationship and interaction. Indeed, all interviewed practitioners stress the importance of providing proper, exhaustive and precise information to service users even though, in most of the interviews the time available for information is described as generally very short or inadequate.

> Information needs time. And there we have a problem again. To really inform a client unhurriedly about what we have to do and what the duties and the rights of clients are. […] If the client says that he simply didn't know or wasn't clear at all about certain legal consequences, that he hasn't been sufficiently informed, I can absolutely imagine that this can happen, yes. […] Thus, for me it's an absolute key moment, that you inform clients very well.

> It's the responsibility of the advisers to adequately inform clients, too. This is time consuming and costs energy. But it often prevents problems in the future.

> The clearer I am, the easier it is. If the client says: "Maybe we could..?" "No way!" Then you probably have three minutes of troubles and then he sits down and it's ok, no way. But if I say: "Well, maybe, let's see and so." […] I mustn't say: "Maybe and perhaps and back and forth." Either it it's ok or it isn't !

Providing information goes beyond a neutral informing about procedures and service functionings and also has to be seen as part of the more complex process of social construction of the client and, as such, as intrinsically interwoven with ideas and governmental strategies. This is important in this context, as activation policies explicitly address citizens' attitudes and behaviour in relation to their employability and labour market integration. Against this background, the providing (and often also prioritising or selecting) of information by frontline practitioners is an important aspect and part of activation. It is frequently mentioned, that information prominently concerns the rights and duties of clients or—as some practitioners emphasise—often even more the duties, as clients are frequently depicted as generally well informed about their rights but tending to "forget their duties".

> They are informed quite well about their rights. Probably about their duties, too, but they always neglect them a bit. You have to specially bring their attention to them.

> In my opinion, the first appointment is one of the most important ones, because there they first get informed about their rights and duties.

> Yes, during the first appointment they get informed about their duties and rights. They are told how we work and what we expect from them, of course, we have to do that. We agree that they have to participate actively upon their own initiative.

Practitioners also exercise discretion by providing information selectively. In this way, they can alert their clients about the different possibilities within given structures and give them hints on how to bypass certain difficulties or how to work the system. By doing so, practitioners can favour clients without violating (too much) the rules and without explicitly making decisions in favour of some clients over others. The selective use of information by way of teaching clients how to behave can substantially advantage those who receive more or special information.

> But, of course, I say to my youngsters: "Listen, if you want to abandon this course because it is that awful and horrible, ok, then do it. Come back here and we'll talk about it!" That's, yeah… I do not even know if I am allowed to do that. I simply do it. I believe that's how we create the conditions within which we can move. [….] It's simply through speaking that people come together. And I try to agree that with my youngsters. Then the appointment gets missed. And you register again in 29 or 30 days. Then you have a new status. And, this way, you can still bypass certain regulations.

> Normally, you give them the service contract and they read it. But here again it's a question of time. Do you present and explain it? […] if you go really through it and make clear that this is what they have to stick to, then it is a contract. Otherwise, it's just a piece of paper I put in my pocket and I chuck away into the next rubbish bin.

Information given by frontline practitioners also alludes to what happens if clients do not stick to the rules or fail to display proper deference. Informing about possible sanctions in round terms and being very clear and strict on these issues does help clients to know from the very start what the rules are and how to behave accordingly. However, from a critical point of view, this is an essential part of the governmental strategies of power and subjectivity

intended to tie given rules to technologies of the self. This is how governing people works and informing about "sticks" and "carrots" is seen as a necessary "part of the game" in activation work. This shows the power and the different possibilities frontline practitioners have in informing clients about their rights and duties and in inculcating proper client behaviour.

> That's what everyone really does, to say explicitly: "You, have you read this! This and that are the consequences if you don't show up there without any valid excuse. Then you will probably lose your money for six or eight weeks. You have to stick to that now. We've documented it, it's written here, you have signed it and, look, I'm going to sign it here." That's just how it is. And then they understand it.

> "And if you don't find anything suitable where you earn the same money as before, then look for something else, where you get less. But you can't continue to sponge off public money!" That's problematic. These are reasonable occupations. And I say that to the client very clearly. "It doesn't harm your health, it's not against moral customs and it's paid according to a collective agreement, too." It doesn't have to be paid according to his former collective agreement. And he says: "But sorry, I've studied this and that and all that jazz." Then I say: "Yes, but we don't have to place you in this sector. I can place you also as a cleaner. I can do that, legally." Whether I really do that is another question.

The ways frontline practitioners give information and teach specific target groups how to be clients differ in relation to their performance and willingness but also depend on which concept of activation practitioners are geared to as part of their sense-making of their daily frontline practice. In fact, although practitioners rarely frame the representations of their role explicitly in political and critical terms, all of them emphasise the importance of how they approach clients and shape their encounter with them, even though their accounts may use pedagogical terms or frame it as issues of personality.

This is not to criticise or to blame frontline workers, but is, on the contrary, helpful for pointing out the important role of street-level practitioners, which gains particular significance under the conditions of the activation paradigm with its more individualised approach to citizens by the state. This

is indicative of how the state works through local practices and situated agency shaped by local actors and the web of beliefs they are embedded in. However, this dimension seems to receive scant attention in discussions about the professionalisation of activation work and its challenges, standards and values. This is even more problematic, as the interaction between frontline practitioners and clients has also psychological implications for users of the public employment and welfare bureaucracy and accompanies their status of being clients. The greater the involvement with institutions and their employees and the more individualised, contingent and conditional the provision of services, the more the self-images of clients might be affected by the signals frontline practitioners give them and by the ways they make use of status, power and information. The meaning of categorisations operated by practitioners goes beyond a functional differentiation for smoother processing in the bureaucratic routine, and has to be understood as providing labels that are psychologically meaningful to clients and, as such, also meaningful for their ability for activation. As practitioners themselves continue to emphasise, who they get as adviser and how they are treated can make a huge difference to clients. The psychological benefits and the self-image clients develop might depend on whether practitioners are perceived as sympathetic, encouraging and giving signals of positive reinforcement or whether they are seen firstly as controlling, disciplining and being suspicious about clients willingness and deservingness. This discretionary dimension of frontline practice is essential for finding real-world solutions in the implementation of policies (and, as such, not to be abolished by bureaucratic control). However, the important question is how this room for discretion is mediated and which normative reference points constitute the basis of judgement operated by practitioners. Although the micro-processes of practitioner–client interactions in frontline practice are relevant for policy outcomes, these critical aspects are hardly considered both in the official job descriptions of frontline activation work and in debates on its professionalisation. While practitioner–client interaction gains in importance in the activation paradigm with its model of individualised service provision, critical aspects and professional challenges remain underexposed. This creates a vacuum in professional debate, which in turn aids the reproduction of processes of individualisation and personalisation in activation work also in relation to frontline practitioners. This

is reflected in the way practitioners present their job and their self-conceptions where the orientation towards help and support and the importance of a helping relationship feature prominently as a personal concern. They stem from the attempt of finding a personally-acceptable way of getting along in this job and do not feature as part of the given mandate and as integral part of a reflexive practice. It can be argued that the construction of clients and the practitioner–client relationship are, therefore, the result of personal efforts, attitudes and interpretations of frontline practitioners.

Frontline practitioners in activation services do not only have to face typical conditions of street-level bureaucracies, such as bureaucratic procedures, heavy case loads and the lack of resources and information. They also are often are concerned with only a small segment of people's needs and, as the findings show, they often have to prioritise problems and procedures which are, in fact, not immediate priorities for the people themselves or simply not realistic short-term goals, as is the case of people who are described as not realistically placeable on the labour market. Activation work therefore also risks appearing inauthentic and frontline practitioners have to devote their energies towards generating the appearance of responsiveness. Moreover, they tend to be involved only in small segments of the whole process towards labour market integration. They normally have minimal time to see their clients, and they have to fall back upon external services, even though they may have the feeling that they could achieve more with more time at their disposal for direct client work while at the same time success depends on a variety of external factors and structural conditions which completely lie outside the influence of active labour market policies. The ultimate outcome of activation work lies beyond the control of frontline workers who face the constant uncertainty whether their efforts will have desired outcomes.

Activation work in this group of practitioners is, thus, characterised by a variety of factors that increase the risk of frontline practitioners becoming alienated in their work and from their clients. This could mean that they also become more willing to accept organisational restructuring and are less concerned with their relationship with clients and with protecting clients' interests and advocating clients' rights. As the findings from the interviews suggest, these risks are not to be underestimated. Although the interviewed practitioners point out the importance of how they interact with clients and

their orientation towards support and a helping relationship, the conception and the conditions of frontline practice in the AMS do not seem to be very conducive to integrating the dimensions of advocacy and support in what is seen as the real mandate of the adviser's job. Rather, these dimensions remain in the sphere of a private and personal concern of the individual practitioner, while practitioners themselves have to cope with the often-alienating conditions of their job.

4.2 Frontline Work in the Agenzia per la Formazione, l'Orientamento e il Lavoro (AFOL) Context in Milan

4.2.1 Providing orientation and support as a professional activity: Practitioners' self-conceptions

Looking at practitioners' interpretations of their role and mandate, the findings for the Milan case also suggest a strong user orientation and a strong emphasis on the helping relationship. It has to be taken into account, however, that the interviewed practitioners in the AFOL context in Milan predominantly concentrate on occupational orientation and career advisory services without assuming the tasks of the classical employment service bureaucracy - such as registration of the unemployed, the bureaucratic control of entitlements, the administration of benefits and the execution of sanctions. These tasks are barely linked with enabling measures of job search assistance and carried out by administrative staff. This is even more the case for the interviewed practitioners in the orientation and career advisory services (Polo Orientamento and Job Caffè).

> We do not enter into their bureaucratic affairs, we're not interested in them. Our job is to work with the person, on the level of competences, on what are you, what your needs in this regard are, and, as I've said before, what you are lacking when it comes to getting a job? But then, we don't even know if they get unemployment benefits or not, it doesn't matter to us. […] Maybe it is asked during the assessment, but it is not relevant for our work. […] The Employment Centre registers the clients, but for mere administrative purposes, to attest the status of unemployment. We are a different matter.[41]

41 All interview quotes in Section 4.2 were translated from Italian by the author.

The situation is somewhat different in the Employment Centre, where the interviewed practitioners also had experiences within the employment service bureaucracy, but even within the employment service there seems to be little contact and integration between the bureaucratic tasks and service provision, even though the Employment Centre is changing and tries to develop better services for both citizens and employers.

> Yes, let's say that during the past few years the prejudice of the Public Employment Service as being only a placement agency has been a bit dispelled. It can offer other services, too. […] Thus, working on this, we made some progress, years ago, when we started with these active policies, it was difficult to convey the message that the Public Employment Service offers more, that it isn't anymore the old placement agency […]. Thus, active policies have also helped to dispel this existing kind of prejudice which is still there.

Anyway, as the interviewed practitioners at the Employment Service are working mainly with younger target groups, their clients most of the time do not receive benefits and, thus, the combination of active and passive policies is not a relevant issue.

> It happened that there were several people in the programme who got benefits because they had just finished an occupation, but were the target of our project and so they took advantage of this offer. But usually we do not have projects that necessarily combine active policies with passive policies.

This structural difference both in the conception and in the organisation of activation services is very important, as it means that in practice there is little integration not only between so called active and passive measures, but also between the demanding and the enabling side of activation. Accordingly, the replies of the interviewed practitioners suggest that frontline practitioners in Milan are less faced with the contradictions and dilemmas of activation work than their colleagues in the Viennese case. Against this background of low exposure to the dilemmas of activation, it is not surprising that practitioners' representations and interpretations of their job seem to be less conflicting and much more in line with the given institutional mandate, which is not

defined as ending unemployment as soon as possible (as is much more the case in the Viennese AMS) but as orienting and supporting people in their job-seeking and labour market integration process. The strong orientation towards a helping relationship expressed by frontline practitioners and their claim to effectively respond to service users' needs is not perceived as being at odds or as incompatible with what the "real" mandate of the job is. Accordingly, the claim to help and to support people, to understand and to respond to individual situations is not framed as a prevalently personal concern or as a private claim to be doing the job in a personally-acceptable way, but is represented as being at the heart of what the job as such is actually about, with all the difficulties and gratifications of a professional activity based on a helping relationship.

> Let's say that our job should actually be considered delicate work, because after all we are working with people and beyond some technicalities and sheets, at the basis of our work there is largely helping relationship, and this fact should require particular attention.

> For doing job orientation and career guidance you definitely need a lot of empathy, listening skills, patience. Let's say that these are the qualities a good adviser has to be endowed with.

> The easy cases are solved quickly, thus, definitely a helping relationship, but with many difficult moments, because those who have employment difficulties actually have to deal with other difficult personal experiences, too. Thus, you have to go in depth anyway and to work also for a long time with those who agree to go this way, as I've said before, and thus accept the agreement and follow a project of more specialised guidance with us.… It is not a job that everyone can do, but this is like all jobs, no? Each of us has his or her own characteristics and qualities, so definitely if you aren't empathetic, if you don't have patience, you don't have the ability to get down and listen to the other person, maybe you should be doing another job, right?

The issues of giving help and support and the dimension of the interpersonal and helping relationship are also at the forefront of the descriptions of the job

that practitioners would give to an outsider who has no clear ideas of what their job is about. Understanding the needs of the individual person and giving orientation and support in an individualised project on the way towards employment - these are the important aspects in how practitioners describe what they are doing in practice.

> I am a career guidance and job counsellor and when I see this question in the eyes: "What's that? Now I'm none the wiser…", I explain that me and my colleagues' job is to facilitate the job search for those who have lost their jobs or who are looking for another one in order to improve their opportunities.

> What I do? It's job guidance and counselling, I support people in their professional choices and job search activities, thus, the improvement of their job search instruments, support both in their choices and their search strategies, that's it. The competences you need? Listening skills, definitely, I'd say, active listening, empathetic listening […], the capability to analyse the problems, too, to effectively grasp a person's needs, but also good displaying capabilities, to be very clear, because you have to give information and to give it in a way that makes it accessible and useful for the others.

At the same time, all the interviewed practitioners do clearly refer to this dimension when they speak about what they like about their job and what they find gratification from.

> It's a job that I am very passionate about because it's anyway based on a helping relationship, being able to support those in difficulty, both in regard to employment or training, and having then maybe some positive accounts, which are difficult to have, but when you get them it's motivating, for sure!

> I am very sure about this; what I really like a lot in this job is the relationship or making the others tell me what they are doing, what it means to do a certain job, […]. And then, then I like a lot, well… helping people elaborate a professional project and seeing that, through the exchange, the chatting, the interview, the fog very often starts to lift and they start spotting a possible way, a

> thing you can just do on your own. […] I definitely like being a facilitator of choices, as some have defined this job.

> To give them a useful message and to make them a bit more autonomous. […] First of all because the common goal is to satisfy the person in a way and to make her or him more autonomous. […] Our work is actually made by the relationship with people, thus they come at first place, for all of us. And then there is also this personal aspect, my own, to interact with people. I could never work in an office, alone, in the back office, thus, this is very important to me, it satisfies me a lot. The biggest satisfaction I get from the person I am talking to.

> And, therefore, it also gratifies me to see that my job is useful in the life of an unemployed person, that it helps. That's the aspect I like in my job, being at the disposal of anyone in difficulties, in employment difficulties in this case.

> Seeing that I am useful to someone who does not even pay for this service and giving a concrete practical answer then, this gratifies me.

> Because I wanted to make a concrete contribution to those who could have been, I don't know, in need.

At the same time, practitioners also refer to the dimension of help and support when they speak about what success means to them in their job. Success is mainly depicted as having an impact on the persons, as encouraging them, as raising their awareness about their possibilities on the labour market and as enabling them in their job search efforts by providing them know-how and better-focused strategies. Of course, the ultimate goal remains the taking up of a job, but as some practitioners point out, the success of orientation, job search assistance and counselling cannot be seen only in an eventual job placement. They frame success more broadly, with a strong focus on the individual person with his or her attitudes, behaviour and skills.

> I'd say that I see success with the people who, after a longer process, I'd say after two, three meetings, start to acquire a better self-awareness, and a better sense of what the reality on the labour market is, because… I'd say a lot of people don't have this awareness. There are a lot of disoriented people, but they

don't know it, let's say that they don't even want to question themselves, they don't want to orient themselves, to use more tools, more resources and to apply more efforts and energies in finding a job. Therefore, if I notice that a person after two, three meetings acquires this awareness, I see that as a case of success. Thus, certainly not the job placement, no, because data on this are missing, unfortunately. Either we keep in touch with the person, then we know it, or this information gets lost. I'd put it this way.

Many times, however, the success of our work, yes, is seen in final employment. But it shouldn't be like this. A perfectly-oriented person could also be an unemployed person, in the sense that orientation does not necessarily have an output in terms of getting a job. But if this person is happy and satisfied and could, maybe, also find a job thanks to your advice, well, you feel useful. Thus, I feel, for me a successful case is a case of helpfulness, when I feel useful to someone. Success for me is when the user thanks me. It happened, for instance, that the user dropped by to thank me bringing chocolates. I do not care for those chocolates! They remain there for everyone, but the fact that I see that I've been able to give something to the person. Sometimes even little things, a bit of courage.

Success is, however, also a person who gets out of here or of an orientation process in a satisfied way, or in other words, a person who thinks that they have grown up a bit, have made some important step towards employment. Because, in the end, the final goal remains the placement, anyway, regardless of whether this is more closely related to what we have done or maybe more the person's own responsibility. But definitely, a person who feels strengthened and supported, or who simply feels that they have a person to talk to, who is able to have a exchange of views and to say: "Okay , I want to talk about this and that before." Having found a professional to discuss all these aspects, this also means success.

Well, the most successful intervention is something you can see, you realise it from the extent a person reflects your message in this moment, from the fact that you see the person getting more active and coming back, I think. That the person doesn't fall back in desperation, but that he or she comes back to

> continue the process with you, this is already a success, because it means that he or she understood the usefulness of the whole thing.

However, although practitioners claim that the success of their activity should be identified first and foremost in terms of their support for, and their impact on, individual persons, they deplore and criticise the fact that it is not possible to have a systematic follow up and to know whether and how assisted people are eventually able to get a job. What is interesting is that practitioners not only criticise the lack of better documentation, but that they also claim that the provision of individual counselling and job search assistance is not matched by concrete placement support in terms of a direct squaring of labour demand and supply. According to them this is not only due to a lack of coordination and internal shortcomings within the AFOL, but also due to the fact that the public employment service is not seen by many employers as an important and effective partner for the recruitment of workforce.

> Let's say that the ideal of making AFOL work really well would be that a person comes here, that I hold my first interviews and make an assessment of the person's needs in order to then say: "This person needs to do this training course in order to re-enter the labour market." The person does this course, I don't know, and then prepares a profile of the competences developed. And that then there is a dialogue with those who are responsible for the placements, that you say: "This person has done this and that and he or she can do this", and that then the person is put in contact with the companies. Let's say that this would be just the ideal world. But there is no such dialogue! This is my opinion.

> We are a bit critical, both on the fact that the visibility of AFOL from the outside is really weak as well as on the integration of our services, yes. We are working well here, surely we are all passionate about our work, though it is hard, even in our daily work, in the interviews with service users, if then we don't have this real integration. That's it, it gets difficult.

> Yes, let's say if a person, hypothetically, is doing a project helped by us which includes orientation, then a training course, then active job search, perhaps

also an internship after the training course and so on, it's a whole journey that moves towards work. But then, they often find themselves alone on this path. That's it, we can't guarantee constant support and coaching during this process. And not just because we promote the direct activation of the service user, that is important and all right, but because we don't have, as my colleague said earlier, a fully integrated system so that the user goes to the Employment Centre, registers there, then comes here for the orientation, is sent to vocational training centre, does the course there, and eventually goes into a company from there. We are already a bit too detached internally for ensuring that to the user. Additionally, there are also the users who get lost because they don't have the tools to ensure the continuity of their job search project on their own. That is another issue again. But it would be nice to imagine AFOL organised in such a way, that a person enters, just enters that door here and can find the whole path to follow till the final output, which is the taking up of a job. But we are lacking in this respect.

But if we speak about service provision, actually, a completely different connection would be needed, even among the offices, here, that's it… But, in fact, sometimes there is an attempt to keep them, I don't say isolated, but communication is definitely not facilitated.

The Employment Centre is no longer seen by companies as an attractive partner, I don't know how to say, in the moment an employer needs staff and this still happens! Because we always talk about the problem of finding a job, but there are employers occasionally jumping the headlines saying: "I'm looking for staff, but I can't find anyone!" These are cases that occur. But the Employment Centre is no longer seen as a useful service for this purpose, because there are the private recruitment businesses, because they are in direct contact with the market much more, but also due to the fact that the Employment Centre has never been distinguished as a service of careful staff selection. The Employment Centre, the old placement was fine when companies were large firms in need of high numbers of unqualified personnel. [...] If the company Pinco Pallino needs a highly skilled technician, etc., it will search through other channels. Thus, let's say that job seekers enter the Employment Centre

> through the formal registration, but effective matching and job offer services are missing.
>
> Yes, the public employment services are in dire need of upgrading and improving their image towards the private sector.… Employers do not solve their staff problems by means of the public employment services. Not at all.

In terms of the relaunch and the organisation of the Employment Service, the informants of Milan, similar to their Viennese colleagues, point out the nature of AFOL as a special enterprise of the Provincial Authority and thus as being a kind of hybrid between a public agency and a private service provider. However, while in the Viennese case, this double-faced nature was discussed mainly in relation to the conflicts frontline practitioners experience between the tasks of individualised service provision and the administration of benefits through control and sanction, this is no issue for the practitioners in Milan. Here, the critique mainly concerns the effectiveness of service provision and the conflict between the old logic of the employment bureaucracy and the new image as service provider, which should become a better point of reference both for job-seekers and for employers.

> Yes, the foundation of AFOL was supposed to be a form of semi-privatisation of the public employment services. Because they had been part of the Provincial Authority, of the department of labour policies, and today AFOL is formally a pivate agency, which nonetheless belongs to the Province. This privatisation, so to speak, was intended to render these services more agile, less bureaucratic and even more "presentable" on the market, but then things went a bit differently. Because, if a formally private agency is owned by the public authority anyway, it is partly even a struggle of logics.
>
> In many cases we've found ourselves right in the middle between the public and private sector, from many points of view, from the viewpoint of staff recruitment, of the corporate policies, and then, I don't know how to say, once the, let's call it the private part, has tried to catch up a bit, I don't really have this cult of the private, but when the private part has tried to make a difference, in terms of speed, of promptness, of private sector logics, whenever there

> was such an attempt to leap forwards, then there was a more public part that slowed down, that has also hindered the process. However, when an agency is owned by a public body, the public body gives the money and wants even to promote its logic, understandably, but, well, the issue is a bit complex.

> We are very convinced that there must be a public employment service, because it's a service that the State in its different configurations and on its different levels has to offer. But, for example, I would find nothing wrong if a qualified service of staff pre-selection were offered at a competitive price, but still at a price, to private enterprises. This could also help to…
> … give visibility!
> … recapture labour market integration as a public service, but also our image towards the private enterprises would gain from that.

Another big issue for frontline practitioners in the AFOL context is the fact that the effects of their work are hardly traceable, that most of the times there is no possibility of having a follow up (with the exception of certain projects connected to benefits receipt), and that, in general, orientation, job search assistance and counselling services do not lead to quantifiable outputs. While in Vienna, where a systematic monitoring system and a follow-up for people registered with the AMS is available, practitioners pointed out the opposite problem of a strong quantitative control of their performance and strict management by objectives (especially in relation to long-term unemployed), practitioners in Milan criticise that what they are doing cannot be made really visible. Although they are aware that an effective placement depends on a variety of factors and that successful orientation or counselling does not mean that the person does necessarily find a job, the fact of not knowing the outcome of their work is seen as a negative element, also in relation to the general visibility of orientation, job search assistance and counselling services. This negatively contributes also to the importance given to these services and, thus, to the political commitment and will to invest in them.

> Maybe I also lose contact with the service user […]. Probably this person starts a training course elsewhere and then seeks a job also in a very effective way.

> Maybe he or she finds a job and then my job has been successful, but I lose track of this. For obvious reasons, because job orientation isn't very "statisticable".
>
> As an orientation and guidance service, we have the further difficulty of orientation not producing interesting numbers, even from a political point of view, because the politician likes the idea of a service which creates jobs, that's it: "How many have been hired this year?" […] But saying that we do not produce jobs, but that we rather produce "oriented" job seekers is a very qualitative matter. And we should be measured on this, on quality. And this brings us to the next big question of how to measure quality, how do you decide, yes, what is an effective service from this point of view?
>
> Above us, there are the service managers who need to run the service, and running the service means that we have our intakes, that we bring the numbers, etc… Above again, the top managers are strongly related to politics, because, after all, there is the Province and AFOL is still one of its political branches. And this means that there are also other objectives, not only of running a service in an effective way, right? It's also about visibility, strong numbers, numbers that make the service visible, the need to account for changes in comparison with the past management. These are, however, different issues and far away from our problems. […] So, we are asking ourselves about the quality of what we are doing, we would prefer to see fewer people and to follow them more. But for the political level, this translates only into fewer numbers, because politics doesn't say or even can't flaunt to the electorate: "We have worked well." Politics wants to say: "We have done a lot!"

This lack of visibility and acknowledgement of orientation, job search-assistance and counselling is also linked to the notion of professionalism. Professionalism was rarely addressed in the interviews with frontline practitioners in Vienna while in Milan, by contrast, practitioners frame representations of their job in terms of a professional activity based on a helping relationship. Hence their strong user orientation and emphasis on establishing a helping relationship are not perceived as being at odds with practitioners' given mandate. On the contrary, the notion of user orientation and the importance of

understanding a person's needs on the basis of a helping relationship are seen as an essential feature of doing a good job.

> It's also the aspect I feel most strong about, actually, understanding what the real need of the service user is. Because the service user never comes with a simple question, it's not like this... You have to understand, to figure it out. That is, however, to be understood and interpreted during the interview what the person is actually really in need of. It may start with a simple request, but often there may be more underneath the surface. So, then the need is to figure it out and to define a possible path, right?
>
> Yes, then everyone puts in their professionalism and passion and so on, and, actually, does a job which is still difficult, well, complicated.

The notion of giving support is also seen as important for providing a better service orientation in public employment services. An up-to-date professional attitude and a certain way of understanding the job contributes to a better services offer, and in general, to improving the image of the Public Employment Service.

> Now I say it, because we are young, not wishing to detract from our colleagues, from whom we have learned all the administrative and bureaucratic part, but it's just about the mental attitude! Of course, they have been working here for 30 years, and they have always worked in a certain way, with a certain approach. We came here, however, with another background, with different experiences, and we probably put ourselves more in the shoes of the service user, because before we had to look for a job, too…. So, this is definitely an added value, I think, if you as staff have your own story which is closer to those of the service users, this can be helpful, not only for the famous empathy, you know, but also for putting yourself in the shoes of the service user in order to better meet their needs and expectations, right?
>
> Each of us has a certain background, there are those graduated, who hold a Master's degree, whatsoever, so, I think that at the level of staff competences

> we are, at least in my opinion, from what I know from my colleagues, we are quite well prepared here for what our job is, in most cases, yes.
>
> Yes, it's really about the mindset. The colleagues, let's say the long-serving ones, for sure, we were given, they have passed on to us all the information about administrative and bureaucratic matters. […] So, well, a more service-oriented way of accommodating the service users, giving a complete service, not only saying: "Ok, I register you on the mobility list." […] This is definitely an added value!

However, some practitioners in Milan also criticise the lack of recognition their work receives from the outside as the importance of their job is often misjudged and reflected neither in the amount of their salaries nor in training offers for practitioners, which are virtually non-existent. One practitioner finds that it would be important to have a better formal recognition of the job and to regulate access to this professional field.

> I don't know how to say, orientation services cost but they don't have an immediate and quantifiable output. And in this sense, everything which has to do with our job is primarily seen as a cost. Even our salary is already considered high, not to mention the idea of offering us some training! It's said: "What's more, you are costing us money!" So, well, there's also this aspect.
>
> What I am doing now is, actually, professional job guidance and orientation. I'd like, however, more importance to be attached to a better official definition of this professional profile. It has been spoken about for years now, probably you know it, about a professional register of career guidance counsellors, about giving, however, also a better formal recognition to this profession, but at the moment it seems as if there weren't many developments in this regard.

Comparing these findings with the findings from the interviews in Vienna shows interesting differences and gives possible indications in relation to the debate on professionalising activation work. In both cases, the issues of help and support and the notion of a helping relationship are at the forefront of practitioners' representations of their practice. There is, however, a striking difference. As mentioned, practitioners in Vienna frame the notion of helping

people prevalently as their personal concern, associating it with the private claim of doing the job in a personally-acceptable way rather than with the definition and the mandate of the job as such. In the picture given by practitioners in Milan this is very different. They frame the notion of help and the importance of a helping relationship as essential features of the job and stress the professional character of their work to underline the importance of better professional recognition. In contrast, when practitioners in Vienna speak about their job, they hardly emphasise its professional character, and the notion of better professional recognition seems not to be an issue. This has significance against the background that frontline practitioners in Vienna are faced much more with the dilemmas of activation, which arise at street level and in their practice context. In Milan, the paradigm of activation is not taken up in such a stringent way, and activation work is still split up to a large extent in classical bureaucratic tasks carried out by administrative staff and services provided by practitioners who uphold the professional nature of what they are doing. Here the demanding and the enabling side of activation hardly come together and do not have to be administered by the same person. Practitioners are faced only with the "softer" side of activation, while in Austria they have to cope with both faces of activation and, thus, are much more exposed to its ambiguities and the resulting dilemmas. In Milan, where individualised service provision is not, or only loosely connected with demanding aspects, practitioners frame their activity and their self-conceptions much more within the patterns of orientation and counselling and as a professional activity. This raises the question as to whether the notion of professionalism can be upheld in the context of stringent activation policies or, put in a more positive way, which preconditions a professionalisation project of activation work would require.

4.2.2 Activation as support (halfway) towards employment

Practitioners in the Milan context place the notions of help and support at the forefront and frame them as professional tasks but do not experience the immediate pressure to bring people into work that much. Accordingly, the orientation towards work is present (and presented) more as a long-term objective, which is not immediately connected with, or visible as a result of

what these practitioners are doing. Both the concrete problem of how to get a job, as well as the policy ideas on how to deal with the problem of unemployment, seem to be perceived as rather "external" problems, as being treated somewhere "out there" rather than as the concrete problems of practice. Accordingly, a critical awareness of structural problems and of problematic aspects of the policy framework is not completely absent but somewhat detached from actual practice issues. Against this background, it is interesting to see how the notion of activation is embraced and interpreted by the practitioners interviewed.

The findings from Milan suggest that the notion of activation is understood mainly in a positive way of giving support on the way towards employment. The focus on dimensions of giving help and support is not only a personal or professional claim, but it reflects the way the notion of activation is embodied in the given practice context. As has already been emphasised, due to both the policy framework and the organisational context, the demanding and the enabling dimension of activation are kept more separate, and accordingly the orientation patterns in practice reflect a predominantly positive view of activation as support, while its demanding dimension and the possible tensions and contradictions between the two sides have little relevance for practice. Moreover, the interpretation of the notion of activation does not seem to depend that much on how target groups are perceived and on how their situation and willingness is assessed. Differentiations made by practitioners in relation to different target groups rarely question the nature of supporting service provision as such, but rather concerns the appropriateness and suitability of various forms of support for job-seekers with different competences and needs.

4.2.2.1 Activation as orientation and awareness raising

In this sense, an important interpretation pattern is related to the dimensions of orientation and awareness raising. Practitioners mention the importance for many job-seekers of getting clearer ideas both on the situation and the possibilities on the labour market as well as on their own ideas and competences and on which strategies to adopt for job-seeking. An important aspect of service provision is the assessment of competences, in finding out possible strategies and channels for better-targeted job-seeking and in helping to de-

velop individual qualification and job search projects. The service objective tends to be focused on orienting and enabling the individual person in his or her job-seeking in an autonomous way.

> So, our goal is definitely orientation counselling and we really emphasise this as soon as we meet the service users, in the sense that for this purpose we are going to really analyse with them all the tools needed for autonomous, proactive job-seeking. And we also give and try to really get over the message that orientation and job guidance counseling is not about, how can I say , giving them the job offers, but it's about providing them with the tools to be used by their own.

> It's orientation, supporting people in their professional orientation and choices and supporting them in their job-seeking activity, thereby strengthening the tools for job-seeking, giving support in relation to both the choices and the instruments. That's it, basically.

> Besides showing them the right channels, it's also important to raise their awareness, right, about what they should do, what has to be done. Because they arrive here, I notice that very much, I don't say that they are presumptious, no, but I also say to them that it is not a criticism, but that job orientation means also guiding them, coaching them towards a realistic, feasible choice.

The importance of awareness raising depends on the specific target groups practitioners encounter. Young people in Italy have already grown up in a climate of crisis and they are, hence, generally well aware of the difficulties of getting a job. What they need is mainly orientation and support in improving their qualifications and job-seeking strategies. The situation is a bit different for older target groups who have lost their jobs and find themselves faced with the challenge of finding a job in circumstances they have not known before.

> Sometimes there is more awareness among the youngest ones. […] Because a nineteen year old […] is already a bit, let's say, a child of the crisis, somehow […] It's a youngster whose parents probably have, they could belong to a generation that is, so to say, half the generation before us, however, who know what the crisis is, who are maybe living it, and maybe their children do so,

too, they might have a perception of the crisis, also through the working life of their parents. The thirty-somethings might still be the children of the job for life, I don't know how to say, so maybe what they have experienced at home is still a bit different, even though they have, on the other hand, better information due to their studies or because they have already started to experience the difficulties of labour market entry by themselves. Well, then the term "young people" formally refers to those aged from 18 to 29 years, but nowadays it's not clear anymore who the young people are. From a working age perspective, at 35 years you might be considered as old by the market and, at the same time, you could still be young because you are still looking, if not for the first, then maybe for your second, job.

4.2.2.2 Activation as practical support

Enabling job seekers and providing them with the right instruments for autonomous job-seeking is seen as the main goal of frontline practitioners. They state that this often requires very concrete practical support, especially for young people seeking a job for the first time and for low-skilled job-seekers who are not familiar with very basic issues like writing a CV, finding the right places to find a job, or preparing for a job interview. For these target groups, AFOL Milano offers special projects and low-threshold services where people can just drop in and get advice on how to look for a job and practical support for the preparation of application documents. The practitioners interviewed stress the importance of helping people in need through these very basic steps.

> Maybe you try to get more concrete, to give more assistance to the person and, thus, you help with, or you do together, more practical things, too, sending their CV for instance, and so on.

> Or simply a good adjustment of their CV. They go away having discovered a world, right, after we have shown them that the CV has to be aligned in a certain way. Because they arrive saying: "I've sent 40 CVs, and I didn't even get one call from anybody! How is it possible that no employer is even calling me?!" Then you try to go deeper into this saying: "Okay, but how did you send it? It's not just about

> quantity, it's the quality. Let's see how you did it, the channels that you used, how you used them, and so on…" That's the other thing we often do, trying to really start from them, from their experiences, also from their experiences of job-seeking in order to find out about critical issues which can then be improved.

> Also with the presentation letter for a speculative application, many of them make use of it, but not the right way, or they don't even know about this possibility. […] So, this is another tool we use to explore together, to analyse, sometimes, if they have already written it, we have a look at it together, we try to start from what they have already prepared, go through it together to correct and to improve it, or we explain how to do it, we give them a template and we say that they can send it to us by e-mail when they have prepared it, and we will have a look at it, correct it and send it then back to them, in order to give effective support for job-seeking and for making an application.

> We really go into the details, we sit down together with the person and then, as my colleague already said, we go to have a look at the job offers together, we go through their CV together. So, here again, we don't say in general: "Well, the CV, these are the rules, do it!" We put ourselves physically there to transcribe, to improve, to delete, to add, you know, together with the person.

An important factor is that these practitioners are quite free in their time management and that they can decide where to go into detail and how much time to dedicate, for instance, to helping a job-seeker preparing his or her CV or in simulating a job interview.

> It's mainly left to the freedom of the individual practitioner, but the tools to be used are primarily matched to the needs of the person, so it really depends on what the person needs, this is the basis, yes. If it is the job interview, for instance, we use the platform a lot, which has this interview simulation tool. We simulate a job interview with them and then we go on to discuss how they've responded and what their strengths and weaknesses in the interview were. So we try to simulate by means of a video what their future job interview could be.

> No, there isn't any rule. In the past, we set as a rule the maximum of half an hour per person, but then the rule of common sense prevails, anyway, if you see that you're going over time and that there are many people waiting, for instance. But it's obvious that for doing orientation there mustn't be too many rules, I think. Because you can't just go and suddenly stop the interview with a person, so it's pretty much left to you, to your discretion.

4.2.2.3 Activation as motivation

A further important interpretation pattern which also emerges from the interviews with practitioners in Milan is, however, the idea transmitting the right message to people, of motivating them in their job-seeking efforts and providing them not only with better strategies and instruments but also with the right determination and "grit". To which extent and how this message has to be given depends on the target groups but also on the individual situation and on the relation between the practitioner and the client. The importance of giving the right message is, however, represented mainly in a positive way, as empowering and motivating people, as telling them that they need to have "that extra oomph". Of course, this concentration on the motivated self with the right attitudes and skills can generally be questioned, as the chance of getting a job depends not only on the endeavour by the individual job-seeker. In general, in the Milan case, where the practitioners interviewed work with their clients prevalently (and in some projects exclusively) on a voluntary basis and, thus, with people who do generally have better chances, the notion of motivation is less at risk of acquiring the bitter taste of cynicism.

> Maybe with some young people the most important thing is to give them the message of "Get moving !", while with the 50-year-old person, comprehension might be more important, or the message has to be given, however, in a different way. And well, then the style and the expertise of the individual practitioner, as well as the trust the service user has towards them come into play, too.

> Because during the interview you realise whether the person must be a bit re-motivated, because motivation is the first requirement you need to look for a job, and then you try to work a bit on this aspect, […] you try to convey some

> oomph, first of all, some positive thinking. […] And then you try to build on on this, too, on the point that if they don't have any motivation, any grit, their success in finding a job depends only on them. I strongly point out this aspect. Because if the motivation doesn't really come from them, they won't even be able to pass it on to an employer who might hire them. And they won't have the grit to really search for a job, to put into play everything, all these things, to question also themselves, to think about what to do, how to present themselves in a better way, because it's all a result of that. That's it.
>
> Indeed, by orientating the service users, we can also re-motivate, re-activate them. So, this might be our function, too, to give kind of a boost, right? What could be the activation of the user.
>
> But if we see that there is no motivation, we are the first to say: "Look, it's an opportunity that we give you, you are to choose whether to participate or not, we do not force anyone here." Yes, because we try to get people who are really interested, also in order to avoid situations of abandonment afterwards.

However, here again, the problematic aspect is that all the efforts made for orienting, motivating and practically supporting people on their way towards employment are not supported by suitable job placement services and, furthermore, often not even matched by basic social security measures. It can be summarised in the case of Milan, that the practice context allows for a more positive interpretation of the notion of activation. Practitioners emphasise the patterns of orientation, support and motivation as positive. Activation can be implemented in an unconstrained way aimed at enabling job-seekers, promoting their autonomy and improving their strategies and instruments for job-seeking. However, this kind of activation work occurs mainly within an orientation or counselling paradigm with loose (or without any) connections to the system of benefit administration (where applicable) and without the concrete connection between job-seekers and available jobs on the labour market. The practitioners interviewed can concentrate on the positive dimension of activation work. At the same time, the findings suggest that the "activation story" finishes there, that job-seekers are eventually left

to their own devices (and resources!) and often even without a minimum of material security.

> Well, perhaps the critical aspect is not to know where to refer people afterwards, thus, leaving them a bit alone, on their own. Which is perhaps also one of my personal problems, because I always put a bit of assistentialism into this work, but I shouldn't do that, because we should just limit ourselves to orientation counselling.

4.2.3 "Rowing against" or "not singing from the same sheet of music": The active–passive divide and practitioners' impact on the street-level production of social citizenship

A significant trait of the Milanese context is both the institutional (within the AFOL context) and practical divide between passive and active labour market policy measures which is clearly reflected in the findings. The practitioners interviewed are less confronted with the demanding side of activation and this affects how they present their job and the way they contextualise it in the broader policy context. They see activation generally in a positive light as enabling people to better perform in their autonomous job-seeking and they describe their job as a professional activity which requires listening to people and understanding their needs. However, they can concentrate only on one dimension of activation that is not covered by other measures or provides further steps for bringing people into work. At the same time, however, they criticise that people (especially those who receive benefits) are not obliged to accept available jobs by their colleagues on the administrative side of the Employment Centre. Although also the Italian legislative framework has seen a tightening of the benefits regulations, making the receipt of benefits more conditional upon job-seeking activities and the acceptance of available jobs, some of the practitioners interviewed (even though not directly involved in the respective tasks) find, or better, they presume and criticise, that these provisions are, in fact, not always implemented in practice and that the unemployed are neither given job offers nor urged to accept them.

> Well, for those who are registered at the Employment Centre and receive benefits, the Employment Centre provides them with job suggestions, in theory, right? And if you don't accept them for the third time, you lose the unemployment benefit. In practice, however, this does not always happen, so it's difficult even for the Employment Centre. What we perceive when we do the interviews here, is that people, the classic thing they say is that they are never contacted by the Employment Centre. So, that's maybe because the world of Milan with all its industries and businesses is very big and so it's not possible to have this daily intersection with all the job offers? That's at least what we perceive.
>
> I mean, for the state, unemployment benefits are an "investment", so to say, so if there isn't any form of checking that the unemployed person is a person who is effectively looking for work, who accepts when given job offers, who wants to remain active on the labour market, then it's really difficult, right? Then, each investment is, I don't say in vain , but…
>
> Yes, this lacking contact between the unemployed person and the Employment Centre. That's simply where registration is carried out and then you receive unemployment benefits, but at least I've never heard anyone saying that they had been provided with any job offers by the Employment Centre. So, maybe this is a bit of a shortcoming...
> ... of the system, right!

The practitioners interviewed stay on the "sunny" side of activation, which allows them to represent what they are doing in more positive terms, to frame it as a professional activity and to claim that it should also be recognised as such. At the same time, they criticise that "on the other side" not enough is done to demand active job-seeking and the acceptance of available jobs, and to control the conditions for benefit receipt. This indicates that benefit receipt is automatically understood or even insinuated as rendering people passive or, as one practitioner points out, as "rowing against" the efforts made to activate people. This shows a strong active–passive divide not only in policy administration and service organisation, but also in practitioners' way of thinking. The interviews show few instances where the idea gets challenged that

people have to be activated to find a job (on their own!) and that the receipt of benefits is rather counterproductive in relation to this aim.

> Although talk has been of active labour market policies in Italy for several years now, the passive labour market policies continue to row against this, because there are also those ones. And it's not only the system of benefits, but the employment centres that continue to register people as did the old placement service [*collocamento*] and then the person expects the phone call with the job surprise, or all the private placement agencies, the temporary employment agencies that say: "Well, come here and do the interview with us and then we'll call you when there is a job for you." So there is still a whole world of passive labour market policies that induces people to believe that there is someone, a service who seeks the the jobs for them.
>
> Well, my personal perception is that, in the case of passive policies, if there is a form of alternative income, many people do not actively seek work as long as they have this alternative, that's it.
>
> This is our, you know, perception, this is what happens, in short, it's the law, and of course, especially these times, in a moment like this, anyone who receives a benefit of any kind tries to keep it close as long as possible…
> ... and they don't activate themselves, in this situation…
> ... and don't activate themselves, indeed.

In this context, practitioners criticise the short-term work schemes intended to protect the employees within the employment contract and point out the risk that people are parked in this kind of benefit schemes without even having the incentive to look for a new job. They find that it would be important to combine also the benefit receipt from short-term work schemes with activating measures and to make it conditional upon job-seeking efforts, as is the case for unemployment benefit (*indennità di discoccupazione*) and for the exceptional application of both mobility and short-term work schemes (*ammortizzatori sociali in deroga*), at least in principle. In general, making benefits receipt more conditional and better combining passive and active measures are seen as important strategies which would allow to include also those unemployed

people who could not be approached otherwise. In this sense, cases in which a stronger activation approach has already been applied are seen as positive. However, for practitioners who already had experiences with mandatory programmes, working with people, often even older unemployed people, who are obliged to follow certain activation schemes is much more difficult while working with young people and on a voluntary basis is a strong advantage for doing their job. Thus, the the practitioners interviewed are rather ambivalent in this regard. When they speak about general policy goals, they advocate stronger activation, but when it comes down to their frontline practice, they point out that it is better to work with people on a voluntary basis.

> It must be said that the social safety net in Italy is really poorly structured, especially the short-term work schemes, because faced with a labour market that offers mainly fixed-term contracts, a benefits regime like the short-term work scheme that promises employers 50 % of tax relief for three years if they hire on permament contracts is an answer that is misleading. You'd have to put the contribution relief on temporary work, because this is what's available. The employees start to think: "Well, I have the short-term work benefit for a year, and then who knows, maybe they will renew it." […] And unfortunately, there have been national cases which are absolutely misleading from this point of view, with people on short-term work schemes for years! So how can you tell these people: "Drop the short-term work benefit and accept this temporary work of three months, because then, who knows, maybe it will be renewed or it will end in a permanent contract." So, with all the emphasis on active labour market policies, on the other hand, there's a continuous rowing against these policies. It is also true that these benefit schemes were designed this way in times when contracts were still permanent and when the job market was less depressed than today, so back then they made more sense. With mobility benefit, as the colleague says, it's different, because a person on mobility benefit is an unemployed person to all effects and therefore they can easily also work for a month, or two or three. Then, when it finishes, they can go back on mobility benefit, that's it, this allows for a more flexible inside and outside of the labour market and benefits receipt. While the short-term work scheme is simply a parking lot.

Well, a system to better link the short-term work scheme benefit with alternative job offers and incentives to take up another job, by law, would be needed, as is the case for unemployment benefit, right? In order to, I don't know, I make you one, maximum two, proposals you can refuse, but the third one has to be accepted, otherwise you lose your right to benefits receipt. I believe in a much more Anglo-Saxon world approach, where this link is much stronger. But the problem is that these rules in Italy are struggling to come into law and to be respected.

I think that, compared to the past, nowadays there is stronger activation of people, sure, for good or evil, regardless of whether they are living that in a positive or negative way. But the fact of not just sitting at home and probably also avoiding resulting situations of moonlighting, as had been the norm before people were on benefits, in this sense it helped a lot, the fact that they were obliged to come here, to do something. It's true that you force them in a way, but, on the other hand, you introduce them to services they wouldn't get in touch with otherwise. So, they are service users we can get in contact with this way, who wouldn't be reachable otherwise.

People who are on benefits due to the exceptional application of the short work scheme [*cassa integrazione in deroga*] must, according to the trade union's agreement in case of cessation of production, company failure, or job rotation, for instance, they have to attend a process of, until two years ago it was of re-qualification, since the last year it's of replacement. […] Yes, there were also those people who had done the same job for twenty, thirty years and who were forced to do these retraining schemes and I don't deny that this has been very difficult, you know, the famous doing the interview with someone who says: "Listen I've been putting in bolts for twenty years now, what do you want to offer me?" or "Ok, I'll go to do this training course, but I am 56 years old, anyway, I am four years away from retirement!" And we met a lot of them…

Well, for me, personally, in relation to this project, its asset is the voluntary nature of the service user, the fact that they are motivated to join the project. […] In the case of people on benefits, for me, the difference lies really in the management of the interview, the fact that, yes, some of them could also develop

> a motivation within the mandatory context, but others were just seeing the obligation, the fact of being forced to do something and that's it. With those it's much more difficult to pass on the message that maybe this support service, this training, could also be helpful in a way, that it might be still good for something, that it should be taken as an opportunity anyway, right?

However, generally the receipt of benefits is more seen as hindering successful activation than as a necessary requirement for informed and autonomous job-seeking (which is depicted, though, as the main objective of practitioners' interventions). One practitioner finds that getting benefits allows for job-seeking to be less pressured, but in general the findings suggest that practitioners embrace the idea that benefits represent a measure which causes passivity. They do not raise the problem that many unemployed people in Italy don't even have access to unemployment benefits or minimum income maintenance. Importance is given to the use of benefits as a springboard rather than a cushion. Individual behaviour and willingness are seen as important criteria, even though the practitioners interviewed are not directly involved in assessing these characteristics of their clients in order to categorise them for further interventions.

> Well, on the one hand, anyone who has access to social security benefits, to short work or mobility benefits, has greater ease at developing a career plan that includes a series of steps to be achieved, has more economic leeway to tackle the job search with time, it's not rest anyway, but with the necessary time.

> Here you really notice the difference between those who understand that time spent in these exceptional circumstances, on short-term work benefits, is a good moment to use to look for another job with a certain ease, and those who are just sitting on the benefits.

The findings from Milan suggest also that practitioners often interpret unemployment as a cultural problem and that the normative idea of the active citizen is associated rather with individual and cultural attitudes than with structural problems and the question for the preconditions of active citizenship.

> Also the current labour market reform, which is, actually, spoken about a lot, is interesting, but the problem is also a bit of a cultural one, isn't it?
>
> Another aspect is the culture of job-seeking, which, in spite of everything, is still lacking. People of a certain cultural and educational background are lacking it, too, there's still this idea that someone else seeks a job for you, and it is deeply rooted also in those who may have the personal skills and tools, because of their studies, their former job experiences, the good possibilities they've had.
>
> If you want to reform the labour market and to guarantee benefits in different situations, actually, there has even been a debate on a guaranteed basic income, and so on, but if the premises are the ones we talked about before, also on a cultural level, it's clear that we, well…
> … that we are a bit backwards.

The important point, however, is that, in the Milanese case, these interpretations are less relevant in terms of social constructions and categorisations of their clients as the basis for their further processing. Practitioners in Milan are less involved in assessing the willingness and individual attitudes as conditions for support and in defining contractual agreements with the individual person. This means that, eventually, the practitioners interviewed in Milan are less required to act as agents of an activating state and that their practice consists of offering services in a quite secluded sphere and within a service provision and counselling paradigm which does not have to cope immediately with the dilemmas of activation and the highly political question of calibrating the rights and duties of the people they encounter on the frontline of services. This fact allows them to speak about their job, expressing a rather classic idea of professionalism as helping their clients, without taking sufficiently into account issues of power and all the difficult questions to which activation as dominant policy paradigm is meant to respond. At the same time, however, practitioners' role and, thus, their interpretations and meanings, are in this context of lesser impact on the street-level shaping of given policies and, eventually, on the street-level production of social citizenship.

5. Comparing Activation Work in Context – Conclusions and Outlook for a Professional Project

At the centre of activation as the dominant policy paradigm in current welfare state development lies the emphasis on the notion of the active citizen who is made responsible and enabled for self-reliance and societal integration, first and foremost through gainful employment on the labour market. In this sense, the notion of activation has an inherent double nature and a janus-faced appearance as demanding on the one hand, and as enabling on the other. The interesting questions, however, are how the notion of activation is taken up and interpreted concretely and how demanding and enabling elements are combined and balanced. These questions go beyond formal policy design and have to be answered in practice and in each individual "case". The analysis of activation policies has, thus, to look also at their operational side and at practices of street-level delivery. What activation eventually means is shaped by interpretations, meanings and use of discretional spaces of situated agents along the policy making, implementing and delivery chain. In this context, front-line work matters.

Caswell et al. (2017) show why it is important to look at activation from a front-line work perspective. First, activation policies are aimed at people who are mostly in vulnerable positions in the labour market and often also more generally. Although the idea of activation meets wide support in society and among policy makers, specific interventions and measures carried out as part of the respective policies and practices are, however, much more contested, especially when they bring to the fore the enforcing, sanctioning and disciplining character of activation. Studying frontline work offers insights in practices and implications of activation and contributes to our understanding of what activation means, for both clients and front-line workers. As Caswell et al. (2017) emphasise, "activation policies are a type of policies p*ar excellence*, where the role of frontline workers as mediators of politics become tangible" (p. 4). Frontline workers have to deal with the dilemmas and tensions arising from the different dimensions and objectives of activation and to solve them in interaction with their clients. Furthermore, activation work often combines rule and regulation-guided activities with forms of service provision that resemble professional rather than administrative work. At the

same time, activation work as a crucial but ambiguous arena of welfare state intervention is not the domain of a strong professional group able to provide legitimate accounts and counter-narratives to political rhetoric and highly politicised debates and positions (Caswell et al., 2017).

Outlining the state of the art in frontline studies of activation, van Berkel maintains that frontline studies contribute towards telling the whole story of activation and of its implications for the people concerned. These studies also show that frontline practice is shaped by a complex set of factors that refer to policy, governance, organisational and occupational contexts. Furthermore, they provide evidence that practices at the frontline of activation services matter, in terms of frontline workers' interpretations, attitudes and strategies, in terms of how clients are treated and of what kind of services they get and in terms of what frontline workers strive for and what can actually be realised as an outcome of activation work (van Berkel, 2017).

In its second part, this book has given voice to the frontline workers of public employment services in the cities of Vienna and Milan. According to the conceptual framework outlined in the first part of the book, the analysis focused on frontline work as street-level bureaucracy, as power in situ and as situated agency and meaning in action. The analysis has been aimed at understanding how frontline practitioners represent and interpret their mandate, roles and practices and how they contextualise them within the wider policy framework. A particular focus has been placed on the analysis of practitioners' self-conceptions and on their interpretations of activation. Furthermore, the analysis has taken into account discretional spaces and their use against the background of frontline workers' understandings and social constructions of the people they encounter as job-seekers, benefit recipients and citizens.

The findings presented are very much in line with the debate on the street-level delivery of activation policies. The representations and narrative accounts of the practitioners interviewed show that practitioners indeed play a crucial role in making activation policy work and in dealing with the tensions and challenges arising from the double-faced nature of activation and its respective institutions and practices, from the emphasis on labour market integration on the one hand, and the real opportunities and wider social problems of their clients on the other, and, last but not least, from high

expectations as well as highly mediated and uncertain outcomes of activation work. Findings from the frontline show the challenges that frontline workers have to face and the strategies and discretionary actions that they adopt. Frontline practices are, however, a highly contextualised phenomenon. Exploring the representations and challenges of activation work in a comparative perspective shows how frontline work is shaped and reflects the backgrounds of different policy, governance, organisational and occupational contexts.

The Austrian context shows a consistent approach to activation and its bearings in practice. In Vienna, the contradictions and dilemmas of activation emerge very concretely in frontline practice, and dealing with the resulting challenges constitutes the daily bread of frontline practitioners. This is not that evident at first sight, as practitioners have to follow quite standardised procedures, rules and legal provisions and to account according to a system of strict managerial control. However, the findings also show that, beneath this regulative framework, practitioners possess discretional spaces which they use in order to get the job done somehow in practice. This is not surprising, the interesting aspects, however, relate to the use of discretion against the background of practitioners' perception of policy ideas, of the interpretations of their role, and of the ways they see and assess the individual client. The findings suggest that different frontline identities can be distinguished. There are those practitioners who assume a stronger caring attitude, taking individual difficulties more into account and questioning the given rules, those who assume a bureaucratic attitude, pointing out that they cannot help but just follow the rules, and those who argue in favour of the bigger policy goal of bringing people out of benefits receipt and into work as quickly as possible. Practitioners embrace policy goals and the orientation towards work in different ways and the findings suggest that this makes a difference in how they actually move in practice. It is particularly interesting to see how the notion of activation is interpreted. Different orientation patterns of activation as qualification or as motivation, but also as disciplinary measure or as the "administration" of the unemployed can be distinguished. These orientation patterns depend heavily on how practitioners see and on how they construct their clients, on how they assess their attitudes and how they cat-

egorise them for further processing. The way the notion of activation is embraced correlates strongly with how practitioners assess the employability and the willingness of the target groups encountered.

These interpretations and different uses of discretional spaces are essential for making activation policies work and, as such, they are also (albeit in part tacitly) accepted. Thus, beneath a strict regulative framework, practitioners do not only find discretional spaces, but they are also required to make use of them, sometimes in order to exercise authority very clearly and in round terms, sometimes even to let someone slip somehow through, depending on their assessment of the individual situation. At the same time, as practitioners themselves declare, it can make a big difference to clients which frontline practitioner they encounter, for better or for worse. Activation work is depicted as a highly individualised (and at least potentially also arbitrary) practice where people run the risk of being at the mercy of whom they encounter. Pointing out these critical aspects should not be seen as a criticism blaming frontline practitioners. The practitioners interviewed have spoken about these issues as the difficulties of their job in a very open and authentic way, showing themselves aware of critical issues and careful about not doing wrong or excessively harming their clients.

However, these issues, which amount to finding an acceptable way of performing their job, are represented by practitioners as personal concerns, as their own and private business. This shows that activation work is a highly individualised project. Getting along with the challenges of the job seems to be every practitioners' very individual matter. Even the definition of certain standards, like acting in a supportive way and not harming clients, seems to be more a personal concern than part of a shared and explicit professional strategy and ethos. This shows that, in the context of activation, processes of individualisation and personalisation are at work also in relation to activation workers themselves. Practitioners are referred back to precarious forms of self-reliance in the performance of their job, while a collective engagement with the challenges of activation work within the given mandate and as part of a professional approach seems to be missing. Eventually, this means that interaction with clients at the frontline of the PES ultimately depends on practitioners' personal efforts, attitudes and interpretations and on how they position themselves within the field of tension of activation work. In

this sense, taking a closer look at the street level shows that, eventually, even in Austria, the delivery of activation policies shows its inconsistencies due to very individualised and not professionally-mediated strategies towards the clients at the street level.

The situation is quite different in the Italian context. Fragmentation and inconsistencies are much more present and visible already at the levels of governance and organisational solutions. Even with the PES context taken into account, different tracks of activation still relying in part on the traditional unemployment bureaucracy and de facto poorly linking benefit administration, conditionality criteria and employment related support services persist. Thus, the practitioners interviewed in Milan are less involved in defining and controlling conditions for support. Instead, they can concentrate on more positive aspects of activation work and do not have to cope directly with the dilemmas of activation and the delicate political questions of calibrating rights and duties of clients.

The practitioners interviewed in Milan put the notions of help and support at the forefront of their practice representations, too, but, in this context, this orientation is not perceived as being (not even potentially) at odds with what the "real" mandate of the job is. On the contrary, practitioners frame the representations of their job explicitly as a complex professional activity in which the consideration of individual situations and needs is not a personal extra, but the main starting point for professional interventions. Accordingly, the understandings of activation are also limited to rather positive interpretations (at least as long as practitioners speak about their own job), pointing out the importance of orienting and motivating people and of providing them with information and better strategies and skills in order to enable them to carry out autonomous job-seeking, while disciplinary aspects are not contemplated at all. At the same time, practitioners seem to "miss" the demanding side of activation when they criticise the fact that their positive efforts in activating people are not equally matched by clear requirements for clients to become active and by making benefits receipt more conditional (which is, however, depicted as the job of others). In this regard, practitioners in Milan seem to be quite ambivalent. While they point out the importance of working on a non-compulsory basis and of improving people's autonomy

when they speak about their own jobs, they seem to embrace the ideological power of activation when they speak about the global policy framework much more uncritically. In this sense, they support the idea of benefits as automatically being passivity-creating measures and they even call for a stronger approach to and a more stringent implementation of activation policies, often without considering what it would mean for their practice if they were directly involved in bringing together enabling and demanding aspects and in administering at the same time both the "carrots" and the "sticks". This means also that the way front-line practitioners see and construct unemployed people does not seem to have such a decisive impact on how they do their job. The findings even suggest that practitioners share more general cultural explanations of unemployment, but, as they are not directly involved in assessing people's willingness and, as a consequence, deservingness, such interpretations are not that relevant for their practice (and probably therefore also less questioned). It is therefore highly significant that in Milan, where the practitioners interviewed are less exposed to the dilemmas of activation, practice representations are framed much more as a professional activity.

These different framings of practice representations and the reference to the notion of professionalism is probably the most interesting point in the comparison of the findings obtained from the two different contexts. Comparing practitioners' accounts from PES in Vienna and Milan raises questions as to the possibilities and constraints for a professional project in the context of activation work. Does major exposure of frontline workers to the dynamics and dilemmas of activation, carry the risk that dealing with these challenges falls increasingly back on the very personal endeavours of highly individualised frontline practitioners instead of being subject to a (collective) professional engagement?

Van Berkel and van der Aa (2015) propose analysing the enactment of the promises of professionalism in the context of activation. It would therefore be important to research how frontline workers deal with ambiguities and conflicts and which strategies and standards they adopt in practice. Van Berkel and van der Aa (2015) are concerned that individual strategies of frontline workers "may lead to very individualised forms of professionalism that are at odds with the traditional type of professionalism based on shared

standards" (p. 277). They argue, though, that activation work is still at an early stage of (re-)professionalisation and that making street-level strategies explicit might contribute to the gradual definition of acknowledged occupational standards and, eventually, professional profiles of activation workers. Arriving at shared professional standards in activation work would require, however, a strategy for making explicit the ways street-level workers deal with the challenges of their everyday practice and developing a shared concern on that front.

The findings from the PES in Vienna show that currently dealing with the challenges of activation work is still mainly an individualised and lonely affair. While individual practitioners try to get their job done in a way that is acceptable to them, a collective debate and a common strategy for the development of shared standards is glaringly missing within the organisational context.

In Milan, different organisational solutions and the differences in the design of activation work distinguish between mere bureaucratic tasks and activation work prevalently as counselling, and skills development on the more pleasant side of activation. The notion of professionalism is referred to, but mainly in relation to professional status and less with regard to professional strategies and standards in practice. A debate on the latter aspects seems to be rather muted in Milan as well, probably because such a debate is less needed, considering the particular configuration and meaning of activation work in this case.

A professionalisation project in the field of activation work would require, however, a collective dimension and a common strategy in order to raise the question of good practice beyond the level of a merely personal endeavour and an individualised use of discretion. Professionalising activation work would mean having a debate and a shared strategy to rekindle the question of finding the right balance between employment-oriented goals and responses to wider social problems as a professional responsibility and as a practice based on accountable standards.

This goes beyond questions about the appropriate technical skills and competences of activation workers. Activation work might put established professional principles to the test and give rise to new occupational standards and even new professional profiles. Efforts of professionalisation in this

field will, however, remain inevitably linked to policy with all its impositions while striving for standards raised above the level of individualised concerns, based on shared professional knowledge and ethics and connected to systems of accountability. Enacting professionalism means engaging with political and normative questions, critically asking how policy, governance and organisational frameworks and occupational contexts determine practice and collectively searching for standards and strategies to practise activation in accountable ways.

Against this background, the concluding argument here is that a more social work- oriented and reflexive model of professionalisation might serve very well as a reference for professionalising activation work. Social work as a professional activity always had to deal with the ambiguities and impositions of social policy and with the highly ambiguous and political tasks of assessing individual situations and needs and negotiating conditions for public support. Precisely these processes of mediating between private needs and public issues and of simultaneously taking a critical stance towards policies as instrumental action of treating and processing people lie at the core of social work as a professional activity which has to be constantly in the making.

Could it be possible to design activation work as a practice of citizenship and as a professional activity able to deal with ambiguities and dilemmas in a way of reflexive cooperation? The findings from the Viennese case make this rather doubtful. The practitioners interviewed do not refer to a professional realm for dealing with the difficulties of their practice. Getting somehow along in the job and doing it in an acceptable manner fall completely back on their personal resources and become each practitioners' very own business. However, being probably the most important linchpin for current welfare state intervention, the analysis of activation policies has to deal with their implications for social citizenship, which is becoming increasingly restricted to those able and willing to seek work on the labour market. This has far-reaching significance and reveals the political content of frontline activation work. Should professionalising activation work foster a participatory dimension of practice in which public issues and private needs can be related to each other by overcoming a strict active–passive divide and by seeing people claiming welfare benefits and being unemployed still as citizens who can make their voice heard and as "active agents, capable of exercising

power and affecting their own welfare and well-being" (Johansson & Hvinden, 2013, p. 48)?

Bringing about such a debate must start from the street level. For this purpose, it is important to explore and analyse, preferably in a comparative perspective, how frontline workers deal with the challenges of activation work and, above all, how professionalism as a collective and shared concern can be enacted (or not) and how different policy possibilities can be shaped and put into practice in different activation regimes and contexts.

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