The street-level delivery of activation policies: constraints and possibilities for a practice of citizenship

Urban Nothdurfter

Free University of Bozen/ Bolzano

The decentralization and individualization of activation services has gained in importance in all European welfare states making lower level discretion an intrinsic feature of activation policies. Thus, the debate on activation policies and on their challenges to social citizenship has to go beyond formal policy and to take into account also its operational and street-level dimension which has to be conceived not as mere organizational and technical issue but as shaping what is eventually produced as policy on the ground. In this context, frontline practice plays a crucial role since it constitutes the very moment where activation policies encounter their target groups and real world solutions have to be found. The proposed presentation is based on a research project aimed at studying the challenges, interpretations and reactions of frontline workers in activation services and analyzing them in the light of a combined theoretical framework which understands frontline practice as part of the policy making chain and addresses issues such as the use of discretion, power and situated agency. The research project consists in a qualitative study undertaken on the frontline of Public Employment Services in the cities of Vienna (Austria) and Milan (Italy). Data have been collected by qualitative interviews with 20 frontline workers and have been analyzed in a general inductive approach. The findings contribute to the debate on constraints and possibilities for a practice of citizenship in a practice field whose 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 concretion of social citizenship.