Working Less, Not More in a Workfare Programme

Group Solidarity, Informal Norms and Alternative Value Systems Amongst Activated Participants

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Published in:
Journal of Social Policy

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.1017/S0047279421000301

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

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Abstract

This article uses extensive ethnographic methods to explore the lived reality of a Danish workfare programme. The programme requires social assistance recipients to perform manual labour for their benefits at municipal work sites. The contrast between the political rhetoric that justifies the workfare programme and the lived reality of it is striking. While the programme is justified as a means to put the passive unemployed to work, there is a norm of working less, not more at the site. The participants spend most of their time waiting or conducting seemingly meaningless work assignments. However, over time, the majority of the participants begin to embrace this modus operandi at the site. This article answers this apparent paradox by turning to concepts from the anthropology of industrial work. Such concepts allow us to analyse how camaraderie exists amongst participants as well as work supervisors at the site. Particularly, the camaraderie is based on group solidarity, an informal regulation of work efficiency and an alternative system of value. Hereby, the article adds to previous findings on the 'lived experiences' of welfare recipients.

Introduction

At one municipal work site located in a desolate forest area on the outskirts of a large Danish city, a group of activated social assistance recipients clocks in every morning, five days a week. They wear identical work clothes and are told to wait for work instructions inside portable cabins. They spend a great deal of time waiting. At the site, there is a pronounced shortage of actual labour assignments. Participants therefore spend most of their time waiting or carrying out seemingly useless assignments. Occasionally, they are told to sweep water from puddles or to prune trees or plants in the middle of the winter when there is no need for it. This group is participating in a Danish workfare programme, which requires social assistance recipients to work for their benefits 25 hours or more per week at municipal work sites created for that purpose. This programme is called Utility Jobs (*Nyttejobs* in Danish) and broadly resembles recent work-first programmes in other European countries where social assistance recipients are required to perform manual labour as a quid pro quo to receive their benefits (e.g. Rossetti et al. 2020; Girardi et al. 2019). The justificatory political rhetoric emphasises that the aim is to activate non-disabled unemployed through manual labour that is beneficial for society. However, this could hardly be further from the lived experiences among participants at the site. They often have to perform useless work assignments and spend most of their time in activation waiting rather than working. They are typically sceptical at the beginning of their time in activation. However, most participants come to accept and even embrace the activation and are fond of their supervisors as the project reaches its final days. The main research question that the article explores is quite simply, how can that be? Why is it that, despite the apparent waste of their time and the seemingly useless work assignments, most participants accept and even embrace the modus operandi of the site?

The existing qualitative literature on the 'lived experiences' of workfare policies, mainly from the UK, provides rich information on the lives of welfare recipients. Such literature has

exposed a deep divide between rhetoric mobilised by politicians to justify workfare reforms on one hand and reality as experienced by affected participants on the other (Mcintosh and Wright 2019; Patrick 2016; Wright 2016). For example, although rhetoric that promotes workfare tends to depict benefit dependency as a lifestyle choice, the studies document the actual everyday struggles of welfare recipients to find employment as well as their attempts to distance themselves from their status as recipients (Patrick 2014; Wright 2016). In our case, however, the explanatory force of this literature has limitations. Participants accept and even embrace the activation project even though it seems to be a waste of time and assignments seem to be derived of meaning.

To make sense of this, we draw on selected insights from the anthropology of industrial work (Burawoy 1979b). This scholarship outlines how the strong 'shop floor' culture at factories and similar workplaces tends to produce worker resistance and collegial solidarity. We recognise that our case differs from actual work sites. For instance, participants receive a benefit, not a salary, and their work assignments must be anti-competitive. Yet when it comes to the culture at the site, there are obvious similarities. For example, the spatial architecture of the site resembles a factory with a meeting room, staff room and workstations. Participants 'clock in' every morning, wear identical work clothes and perform manual labour in groups while taking orders from supervisors.

Drawing on insights and concepts from the scholarship on the industrial anthropology of work, our analysis highlights three aspects that are particularly important for answering our research question. (1) As participants and supervisors spend a large amount of time together but away from the bureaucratic power structures of the job centre, *group solidarity* and camaraderie between participants as well as between supervisors and participants flourish at the site. This blurs the line and power asymmetry between the participants and their supervisors, which allows for the establishment of strong social bonds. (2) As it is generally recognised amongst participants that there is a shortage of labour assignments, a *strong informal regulation of the acceptable amount of*

work takes place. An informal norm of working less and 'not working too hard' – connecting hard work with disloyalty to the group - is established and informally sanctioned at the site and taught to newcomers by supervisors as well as by experienced participants. (3) In the absence of useful activities, participants create *an alternative value system.* They attach new meaning to their work assignments and relate them to practices such as reflecting on their lives, socialising with fellow participants and exercising and maintaining their physical health.

Empirically, we rely on rich ethnographic data from a Utility Jobs activation site gathered by one of the authors over a period of 12 months. Ethnography allows for an in-depth understanding of certain aspects of the lived reality of workfare, such as tacit norms and informal regulation of acceptable behaviour, which are important but rarely explicitly articulated in formal interviews. We combine this large amount of field observations with 42 in-depth interviews with participants activated at the site enabling us to understand how the participants ascribe meaning to their life in activation, the work assignments they conduct and how this changes over time. Analysing just one example of a very specific policy programme gives our analysis a narrow focus. Naturally, this leaves out numerous activation policies as well as numerous aspects of the lives of benefit recipients (see Edin and Lein 1997; Patrick 2017; Shildrick et al. 2012). Yet, it allows us to dig deep into the informal norms and related experiences that unfold at the activation site.

This article adds to the existing literature in three ways. First, it confirms the main findings from the 'lived experiences' scholarship by documenting how the lived reality of workfare can be far removed from its articulation in political rhetoric. Second, it leverages concepts from the anthropology of industrial work to understand how participants come to accept their life in activation even though it often involves considerable waiting time and the performance of useless work assignments. Finally, the article demonstrates specific benefits of combining observation and qualitative interviews in studies of the lived experiences of workfare.

In the next section, we discuss selected existing literature to contextualise our analysis. The second section briefly describes the Utility Job initiative and its justification in Danish policy papers and public debate. In the third section, we describe the methods applied, the data we analysed and our strategy of analysis. In section four, we present our analysis, and the final section summarises the results and discusses some of their implications.

Section I

The 'lived experiences' of workfare

Workfare can be quite a slippery concept. For this article, we follow Lødemel and Trickey's (Lødemel and Trickey 2001, 9) helpful definition of workfare as having three key characteristics. First, workfare is compulsory in the sense that non-compliance with its requirements carries the risk of lost or reduced benefits for the welfare recipient. Second, workfare is primarily about work. This means that work more often than not is both the aim of the programme *and* the means to achieve the aim – for example through work-for-the-benefit programmes. Third, workfare is defined as a condition tied to being in a 'last resort income programme' with no further safety net for the recipient.

Conservative scholars, in particular, have been strong proponents of workfare (Quaid 2002). Most notably, Lawrence Mead famously argued that the problems of the welfare state is not 'its size, but its permissiveness' (Mead 1986). As benefits are awarded as entitlements, this creates a 'culture of poverty' where recipients rely on benefits as a way of life rather than seeking work (Mead 1992). As a solution, welfare benefits must be coupled with a strong work obligation to encourage recipients to find work. Scholars have investigated how workfare ideas have spread and influenced policies across the US and Europe over the past decades (Dwyer 2004; Handler 2004; Peck 2001; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Recently, a growing number of qualitative studies, particularly from the UK, analyse such policies from the perspective of the 'lived experiences' of benefit recipients and challenge its basic premises (Mcintosh and Wright 2019; Patrick 2020; Wright 2016). An important overall finding from this literature is that vast discrepancies exist between the political rhetoric of workfare and the actual experiences of it, leading to hardships for benefit recipients. Specifically, three mismatches between political rhetoric and reality are foregrounded in this literature. Firstly, they contest the basic assumption that relying on welfare benefits is a lifestyle choice. Based primarily on qualitative interviews, studies have found that most benefit recipients want to find a job, feel ashamed of their situation and dissociate themselves from their status as a recipient (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 2014; Patrick 2017; Shildrick and MacDonald 2013a; Wright 2016). Secondly, studies have critically questioned whether workfare policies actually bring recipients closer to finding actual employment. For example, Danneris and Nielsen (2018) use a longitudinal approach to explore discrepancies between political rhetoric, emphasising how the 'job readiness' of disadvantaged recipients gradually increases with time, and how the actual experiences of such recipients contain phases of moving further and further away from the labour market. Thirdly, such studies have examined the feelings of exclusion generated by workfare policies. Particularly, studies have documented how processes of 'othering' – when the non-poor talk of and treat the poor as inferior – leads to feelings of stigmatisation and shame (Lister 2004, 2015). Furthermore, divisive processes where people in poverty are 'othered' by other people in poverty have been widely documented and found to decrease solidarity and hinder collective action (Chase and Walker 2012; Pultz 2018; Shildrick and MacDonald 2013b).

Similar to these studies of the lived reality of workfare, we also find a sharp contrast between public rhetoric of workfare and reality at the actual utility job site. However, as already stated in the introduction, participants at the workfare site generally establish strong social bonds

and share a sense of solidarity. This has hitherto not been a central focus point in the literature of lived experiences of workfare. Therefore, our analysis leverages insights from the anthropology of industrial work (see e.g. Burawoy 1979a; Hodson 1997; Tucker 1993) as 'missing pieces' to conceptualise the strong social bonds and tacit normative regulation of work amongst the participants at the utility job site. These studies show how factory workers who face degrading or uncertain employment conditions ascribe new meaning to their work. For example, they optimise the social rewards of their work and form friendships with co-workers (Burawoy 1979a).

Section II

Case description and methodology

On Labour Day, 2011, the then leader and future prime minister of the Danish Social Democratic Party gave a speech in which she problematised the 'passivity' and the 'aggressive carelessness' of the social assistance system maintained by the centre-right-wing government in power at the time[1]. The solution suggested by the Social Democrats, which was to become part of the political agenda in the following years, was to require non-disabled social assistance recipients to be activated in work-for-the-benefit-related programmes.

Unemployment services in Denmark are structured around a two-tier system. Social assistance, discussed in the Social Democratic Leader's speech, is provided to the uninsured unemployed whereas unemployment benefits are provided to the insured unemployed. In the 1980s and 1990s, activation became an increasingly applied tool in the delivery of unemployment services. In the early years, activation was mainly based on a human capital approach, with a strong political focus on education and internships (Torfing 1999). Since the early 2000s, however, the human capital approach has been supplanted by numerous work-first inspired policies – particularly

[1] The entire speech, in Danish, is accessible here: https://dansketaler.dk/tale/helle-thorning-schmidts-1-maj-tale-2011/.

targeting selected groups of social assistance recipients – with the aim of transferring recipients to the labour market as soon as possible (Caswell and Larsen 2017).

The social policy visions of the Social Democrats in 2011 were heavily inspired by one specific initiative in the Danish municipality of Aalborg, referred to in the popular rhetoric of public debate at the time as simply the Aalborg model (Nielsen 2014). Aalborg activated all non-disabled social assistance recipients under the age of 30 in municipal work teams from their first day of claiming benefits. They worked full time, or close to full time, for their benefit (equating an hourly 'salary' far below the negotiated minimum income of Danish collective agreements), and the initiative appealed to politicians for a number of reasons, as it mixed liberal and communitarian forms of justification (Eleveld and Kampen 2020; Nielsen 2017; Nielsen 2019). First, at a time with relatively high youth unemployment, the results from the municipality were striking. The vast majority of the activated social assistance recipients quickly refrained from claiming benefits. This sent a clear signal that keeping people out of the system was an important quality of the model. Second, the Aalborg model was justified as a form of empowerment – teaching the values and norms of doing hard work to the 'passive unemployed'. A third political rationale stated that with utility jobs, tasks that need to be done are done for the benefit of the wider community.

In 2013, the government led by the Social Democrats presented a programme very similar to the Aalborg model as part of their largescale reform of the Danish social assistance system called Everyone Can Be Useful (Ministry of Employment 2013). From this point, municipalities were to activate selected groups of social assistance recipients in so-called utility jobs, defined purposefully loosely in the reform documents as 'municipal work sites' that are not 'anti-competitive' (Ministry of Employment 2013). This placed the municipalities in a dilemma. On the one hand, utility jobs were supposed to be useful and thereby opposed to so-called pointless activation courses that were criticised in the public debate at the time (Breidahl and Larsen 2015). On the other hand, the jobs

should not be accused of replacing 'real' jobs with activation. Generally, utility jobs fall within in one of two job categories. They can either be manual outdoor labour, such as cleaning gardens, beaches or public parks (called 'project places'), or they can help out in the municipal institutions, such as the library, day-care institutions or the cantina at the City Hall[2]. The municipalities have relatively great freedom in terms of deciding both the content and the structure of utility jobs.

Most often, utility jobs are targeted for the most resourceful groups of social assistance recipients (officially categorised as the 'job-ready' or 'obviously education ready'). They are usually obligated to participate in the utility jobs scheme after they have participated in a course on searching for a job or if they fail to find an internship. However, some municipalities make participants who are under 30 years old, who are categorised as 'obviously ready for education', participate in utility jobs programmes from their first week of unemployment. If they refuse to participate in the utility jobs scheme, they are financially sanctioned.

In 2019, 75 out of 98 Danish municipalities activated social assistance recipients in utility jobs[3]. However, it is used much less than the most widely applied activation instruments such as job training at companies[4]. The most vulnerable groups of recipients are offered other activation measures and for the most resourceful, these measures are often used in combination with other instruments. The length of utility jobs is up to 13 weeks and recipients are usually referred to utility jobs after six months of unemployment, although this varies across municipalities (DAMVAD 2015; Danish Agency for Labor Market and Recruitment 2015).

[2] Based on the work of two Danish journalists in 2015 who collected descriptions of utility jobs from most Danish municipalities.
[3] Data from Jobindsats.dk, the official archive of statistics from Danish job centres.
[4] In 2019, a little less than 11,000 social assistance recipients were activated in utility jobs whereas six times as many participated in job training.

The ethnographic data was gathered at one location for the project – a desolate forest area on the outskirts of the residential area of a large Danish city. The site consists of several buildings, including a staff room, a dressing room for participants and a meeting room where participants gather in the morning and are informed about each days' work assignments. At the site, participants are required to perform manual labour five hours each weekday for 13 weeks. The different work tasks consist of tidying up nearby public parks, trimming trees and plants, picking up trash and keeping the area clean. On their first day, participants are given a short presentation of the work assignments. Afterwards, they are issued a set of work clothes and a pair of safety shoes. Participants are divided into two teams with 10 to 20 people on each team. The first team is at the site from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and the second team arrives at 9:00 a.m. and stays until 2:00 p.m.

There are different groups of employees at the site. The supervisors, many of whom have a background as workers or gardeners and some of whom have been unemployed themselves, direct the work assignments. They also accompany participants in the park as they supervise and work alongside them as well. They are in charge of registering participants in the morning but have very little formal paperwork to carry out. Moreover, there are typically four caseworkers in the staff room who have the responsibility of carrying out consultations with the participants, focusing on their obligations and job searches. Most of these caseworkers have a background in social work.

Methodology

Studying the lived reality of workfare policies, scholars have typically either interviewed staff (e.g. Dunn 2013) or participants in welfare programs (e.g. Patrick 2014). Regarding the participants, the more recent studies highlight the potential of more 'participatory research' (Mcintosh and Wright 2019; Patrick 2020). Relatively few studies, however, use direct observation of participants. The methodology of this paper is based on a combination of participant observation and in-depth

interviews with the participants at the activation site[5]. Directly observing the participants in their daily rounds in activation enables us to study prevailing tacit and informal norms, such as of regulating acceptable amounts of work. As this is rarely articulated, but exists more often as embodied knowledge, direct observation is key to uncovering these informal norms (Wacquant 2015). Interviewing participants allows us to gain insight into how they experience these norms, such as how they embrace working inefficiently, which cannot be studied through observations.

Observations were conducted over a period of 12 months[6], amounting to a total of 370 hours of fieldwork. The field notes for each day comprised three to five pages, and the number of pages of field notes totalled approximately 350 pages. The aim was to become as actively involved as possible in the daily lives of the participants. One of the authors therefore participated in all aspects of activation, conducting work alongside the participants and the work supervisors, and came and left the activation site at the same time as the participants. This enabled studying both how the work supervisors managed the participants and the work assignments, and how the participants acted upon this, by forming groups, for example.

Participant observations were supplemented with 42 recorded interviews[7] with the participants, with an average length of 1.5 hours. Developing a trustful relationship with eight of the interviewees, the author interviewed them twice at different stages in their activation. This allowed us to dig further into the question of how their experience changed over time. The interviews were semi-structured, and the themes in the interview guide included their backgrounds, their everyday lives in activation, their relationship with the staff and their broader perceptions of the cash-

[6] The majority of observations were conducted between December 2018 and May 2019. Follow-up observations were conducted from August 2019 until December 2019.
[7] Ten interviews were also conducted with the staff at the activation site, including the work supervisors, the caseworkers and a manager.

assistance scheme. The interview group consisted of 22 men and 12 women[8] and except for six interviewees, all ethnic Danes. The participants' educational background ranged from a master's degree to shorter vocational education, and the group also included those who were unskilled. The length of time that participants had received assistance also varied. Some had recently applied for social assistance for the first time and were sent to the activation site. Others had received social assistance for years, which meant that they had participated in the utility jobs programme several times.

All interviews were transcribed and imported into NVivo and underwent two rounds of coding. In the first phase, we did an across reading of all the interviews during which we reported our theoretical reflections into memos. In this phase, we focused on how the interviewees described the utility scheme, including the work assignments, their relationship with the work supervisors as well as with the fellow participants. From these descriptions, it was clear that the everyday reality of activation was far from the political rhetoric and objective of utility jobs. In the next round, we conducted a more detailed coding, focusing on which aspects of life in activation were different from the political objective. In this phase, we discovered that the participants emphasised both how waiting time rather than activity, and how useless work assignments rather than useful work assignments characterised their everyday life in activation. Yet despite this, we also found that the interviewees attributed new meanings to these aspects of activation. We coded the specific meanings that they attached to activation as 'socialising with others' or 'getting exercise', for example. We triangulated these descriptions with the field notes to explore how the participants actually engaged with fellow participants and the work supervisors, and how through these engagements, they created new norms of how to work and behave at the site.

[8] This gender bias is present across all municipalities. In terms of 'job ready' group in utility jobs as of 2014, 71% are men, while 29% are women (Danish Agency for Labor Market and Recruitment, 2015:17).

A commitment to good ethical practice was embedded in the whole research endeavour and data collection and analysis has followed national and university guidelines on ethics and data protection. In particular, all participants' names in the study have been anonymized and replaced with pseudonyms. All interviewees signed a consent form where they were informed of the purpose of the study, how their data were stored securely and their right to withdraw their consent at all times. Finally, the author who conducted observations, made sure to disclose his identity as a researcher to the participants.

Section IV

Group solidarity: An informal relationship between participants and work supervisors

Entering the activation site, the author who conducted the observations expected that the participants would resent the work supervisors. After all, the work supervisors told them to put on work clothes and conduct manual labour to earn their benefits. What he found was a social community where a jovial and light-hearted tone characterised their interaction. For example, in late April, a group of participants that was working in the park cutting trees took a break, with some participants sitting on benches and others sitting on the grass drinking coffee. After 15 minutes, two work supervisors dropped by. As soon as they spotted the participants taking a break, they laughed. One of the work supervisors, Uffe, said, 'Wow, that's quite a picnic you're having! All that's missing is the rosé and a transistor radio'. Ole, the other supervisor, followed up: 'Did you just move a bunch of branches out here and put them on the ground to make it look like you actually did something?' Everyone laughed. As the work supervisors were heading back, one of the participants, Johannes (age 40s), said jokingly, 'Hey! Why don't you pick up some branches now that you're at it?' Both Uffe and Ole laughed.

This shows how the relationship between the work supervisors and the participants is characterised by an informal tone. The work supervisor, Ole, suggested ironically that the participants purposely placed a bunch of branches in the field to make it appear as if they were working. However, the participants were allowed to tell jokes as well. This was evident when one of the participants, Johannes, told the work supervisors to pick up the branches and start working themselves.

The informal tone of their conversation is far from the standard in typical encounters between frontline workers and participants in workfare programmes (see Brodkin 2011; Soss et al. 2011). In these encounters, participants often feel degraded and humiliated by frontline workers (Soss 1999). However, contrary to those encounters, the participants and the work supervisors in our study interacted for 25 hours each week for more than three months. This paved the way for a more informal relationship. For example, we found that in the interviews, only six participants described their relationship with supervisors in a negative way. The remaining described them as nice, helpful, responsive, fun and even cool. In fact, some ended up being so engaged in the community at the site that it was difficult for them to leave the programme. Monica, (age 50s) and three weeks from finishing the programme, stated,

> And time just flies, it really does … EVEN this project isn't as awful as I had expected. I think Sebastian [work supervisor] and Ole [work supervisor] are just extremely receptive (…). And since we've been lucky and had some nice weather, I've actually had some days out there where I thought, 'This is pretty damn cool', right? I mean, considering that it's something I HAVE TO DO … (…) what if … could one apply to stay here if I'm not lucky enough to find a job in three weeks?

Participants also created strong companionships with their fellow participants. For example, Pia (age 30s) stressed how the utility job project was one of the best things to happen to her in a long time. This made her sad that she would have to leave:

> Yeah, so I think it's been really cool, and of course I'm sad that I have to stop now, well, yeah, a month and a half before my last day. Of course, I'm happy that I found an internship (…) but it just happened so suddenly, and I would have liked some time to prepare mentally to leave this place. I kind of feel at home when I'm here (…) And I think we have a really good community where you meet new people, and I hope we will stay in touch after this utility job.

Pia was even observed at the activation site twice after having finished her activation period. Both times, she came to borrow some work clothes but stayed for a while to talk and socialise with the others.

Informal regulation of the accepted amount of work: A norm of not working too hard

As indicated by the name of the policy proposal, Everyone Can Be Useful (Ministry of Employment 2013), the intention of utility jobs was to require participants to conduct useful labour assignments. However, when participants arrived at the activation site, a different story unfolded. The norms, the daily routines and the community at the activation site were influenced by one important factor: there simply was not enough work to keep between 20 to 40 participants occupied for 25 hours per week. The participants were officially required to work when they arrived at 8:00 a.m. or 9:00 a.m. However, they often spent up to one hour in the meeting room, awaiting instructions from the supervisor. During this period, they had few activities to conduct, and only a couple of computers were available for writing job applications. As they were rarely informed of how long they had to wait, few participants used their time productively. Furthermore, supervisors encouraged

participants to take a break multiple times each day and some of these breaks lasted more than 30 minutes. Combined with the waiting time in the morning and in the afternoon, this meant that the part of the day when participants actually worked *varied between one and a half and two hours per day*, which is much less than half of the formally stated five hours per day. Participants also repeatedly emphasised how the majority of their activation was spent 'doing nothing'. When asked to describe a normal day of work, Franz (age 50s) explained,

> On a typical day, you get in at 9 (…). Then you drink a cup of coffee or go outside to smoke. Or both. And then around 9:30 to 9:45, they [the work supervisors] decide what you're actually doing and then you start on that (…). 2 to 2.5 hours where you work. You have quite a few coffee breaks and … yeah, then around … around 12 … 12:15, you pack up and return to the site.

At the beginning of their activation period, this generated multiple negative experiences. Their perceptions included frustration, demotivation and feelings that they were wasting their time. One of the interviewees, Morten (age 30s) expressed how he usually arrived at the activation site in a good mood. Yet, when he had to wait at the very beginning of the day, he became very sceptical: 'Then I feel that I'm one of those people who kind of contribute to a negative atmosphere'. With time, however, most participants accepted the state of inactivity at the activation site. Although negative experiences did not diminish, the participants slowly began to familiarise themselves with the norms of the work site and accepted that there was a general shortage of work assignments.

Workers have been known to develop strategies to regulate the amount of work in a variety of different work contexts in order to 'withhold labor past a certain collectively negotiated maximum' (Hodson 1995, 90). Similar dynamics occur at the activation site. For example, one day in December, while the participants were working in a park, Arne (work supervisor) suddenly shouted,

> 'BREAK TIME!!! Don't stand there and keep working. Are you completely out of your minds?!' he says laughing. Several of the participants come over, and Arne starts to unpack the cakes (…). While the participants are talking, one woman is still working. 'Scab!!' one of the participants shouts and laughs. It is a man, short with long black hair. He is in his early fifties. The woman is wearing a yellow hat so she is easy to spot in the common. She is raking goldenrod. 'Stop working and get over here, you fan of [Danish Football Club]', Arne shouts and laughs. The woman comes over. She is apparently Norwegian (…). 'How do you say "scab" in Norwegian?' the same man asks and laughs. 'I actually don't know', the woman says and chuckles. The participants stand around talking for half an hour (Field note, 2 Dec. 2019).

This scene shows the informal regulation of the accepted amount of work in action. When the man shouts 'scab', he enforces a norm, separating acceptable behaviour ('not working too hard') from unacceptable behaviour ('working too hard'). This norm was also upheld by more 'experienced' participants themselves, even when no supervisor was around. When the supervisors were not present while the participants were working, participants would begin the workday by having a break, followed by multiple breaks during the day. One day, in March, a group of five participants arrived at the park to work. It was the first day of activation for one of the participants. As we parked the car and got out, a man who had been at activation for a while said, 'We are just gonna start out by having a cup coffee'. Another man added, 'And a cigarette', he said and laughed. As we gathered around the car with our cups of coffee, the new participant stood a few metres away. He was clearly impatient, and after a little while, he shook his head and said, 'What are we supposed to do today?' Throughout the day, the newcomer repeatedly asked for new labour assignments and was continuously told by the others to relax and take a break.

These two examples, which are representative of our empirical material, show how supervisors as well as the participants preserve a norm of 'not working too hard'. It is based on the strong social ties and camaraderie at the site, and those who violate the norm are considered disloyal to the group.

An alternative value system: The establishment of new ideas of meaningfulness

The official policy proposal emphasises the usefulness of work assignments in a utility scheme that preserves natural areas and contributes to the beautification of public parks. However, although nature preservation can take some time during the spring and summer, the supervisors often had a hard time coming up with alternative work assignments during autumn and winter. They solved the shortage of labour assignments by eventually inventing useless work assignments. As a result, participants often had to cut trees or plants even though it was in the wrong season. Although the participants fully acknowledged the apparent 'uselessness' of these assignments, over time they came to ascribe new forms of meanings to the activities. This is the third finding of our analysis: the establishment of an alternative value system, which leads participants to accept the way things are at the site.

One day, after a rain shower, one of the newly arrived participants was asked to remove water from one of the holes in the parking lot with a broom. Johannes, (age 40s), witnessed the scene:

> You know, it is deadly serious, one of the unemployed down here was told to drain those holes because then they could maybe redirect the water, like (…). Well, that's not getting him any fucking closer to the job market. Sweeping puddles (laughs). I'm sorry, but that's just idiotic, to be honest.

Experiencing scenes such as this made several of the participants feel that the tasks they performed were 'useless'. Some even came to think of the activation site as a 'pseudo reality' made up by individuals who pretended to do real work. As Sofie (age 50s) expressed it in an interview:

> Well … and then you kind of lose respect for it because then it's not, then it's not real life, then it's a pseudo reality. I mean, we all pretend that this is working out, we're walking around pretending to be doing something, and we do what we feel like, when we feel like it, and when we don't feel like it, we find something else.

Nevertheless, most participants still portrayed their personal participation in the activation project as meaningful. The interviewees stressed that it gave them a purpose in their everyday lives, such as escaping isolation, learning to get up in the morning, meeting new people or getting some exercise. Moreover, a significant number of the interviewees came to appreciate being outdoors and stressed how the fresh air gave them time to reflect on their lives and to view the work as therapy. What unfolds is therefore what the anthropology of industrial work refers to as an 'alternative value system' where participants reject the official political definition of utility jobs and ascribe new definitions of meaningfulness to their life in activation. In an interview one day before she had to leave the activation site, Randi (age 30s) sums up what she learned about herself from her time in activation:

> For me, I think there's a lesson in this … and … how should I put it … relaxing a little, because I've always … I mean, normally when I have a job, I just work like a maniac, but I've really had to … well, how to put it, get used to it. That's not how it works here. You can't be as … how should I put it … you can't be too eager. I really sense that. It's just not that kind of atmosphere…. (…). I mean, I think it's really nice to be out here in … in the field, if you know what I mean, right? … Getting all this fresh air and … good exercise (…).

For others, the objective of conducting work assignments was simply substituted for the objective of learning to interact with other participants. When Tanja (age 40s) was asked about the importance of conducting the labour assignments, she replied,

> What we're doing is not important at all. Not at all! It just isn't. Like Ole [work supervisor] says, it's about people, if they've been on their own for a long time, it's probably smart to get out and … because you may become afraid of meeting other people.

When assessed through the lens of the alternative system of value, the experienced 'meaningfulness' associated with taking part in the utility job project has less to do with carrying out meaningful work tasks that need to be done and more to do with forms of meaningfulness associated with an inner sense of personal development.

Section V

Conclusion

This article has explored the everyday reality of participants in a workfare programme, including how they perform work and how they interact with fellow participants and their supervisors. The article therefore makes three contributions. First, it confirms findings from the 'lived experiences' of social policies, as it shows the large discrepancies between the political justification of the utility jobs programme and the everyday reality of participants. The political objective of the programme is to incentivise the participants to find a job as soon as possible. Yet at the site, a blossoming social community between the participants and the supervisors is formed, which even makes some of the participants wish they could stay, as the story of Monica and Pia shows. The idea of utility jobs is to make the participants work for their benefits in order to teach them how to engage in real-life work communities. At the site, however, participants and supervisors create a norm of not working too

hard. The programme also strives to activate participants by making them perform work assignments that are useful for the local community. However, participants often had to perform rather *useless* assignments, such as sweeping puddles.

Second, the article has explored an apparent paradox related to this mismatch between rhetoric and reality. Although participants – contrary to the catchphrases of the political rhetoric – spent most of their time in the activation project waiting or doing seemingly useless work assignments, most of them were quite satisfied with the activation project once they reached the end of the programme. To make sense of this, this article introduced central themes and concepts from the anthropology of industrial work that might be helpful for analyses that try to understand the culture amongst unemployed people participating in 'work for welfare' programmes as well as for analyses that try to understand why people tend to accept apparent pointless job activities (e.g. Graeber 2018). We conclude that the apparent paradoxical acceptance of the programme relies particularly on three factors, namely (a) group solidarity (spanning across supervisors and participants), (b) a strong informal regulation of the acceptable amount of work and (c) the establishment of an alternative value system, which ascribes meaningfulness to the tasks the participants have to carry out.

Third, this paper shows the importance of combining both interviews – which have hitherto been the main method of exploring the lived experiences of workfare policies – and participant observations. Directly observing participants enables us to discover aspects of the lived experiences of workfare, which are rarely articulated: informally regulating the amount of work in order to work inefficiently and forming strong bonds with fellow participants and their supervisors. By combining observations with interviews, we were able to study how they articulate these matters as well as how they attach meaning to these aspects of their time in activation.

Although the aim of the article is not to make generalisations, certain aspects suggest that our findings may not be unique to our case. Previous studies of similar activation projects in Denmark have presented quite similar results (see e.g. Mik-Meyer 1999). Moreover, conversations we have had with administrators of the utility jobs programme in other municipalities in Denmark suggest that the main findings of our case study can be found in other contexts as well. In some municipalities it is well-known amongst employees that utility jobs are substantially as much about 'wasting time' as they are about doing hard labour for the benefit of the wider community. Future research can dig into the prevalence of our findings in other contexts.

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