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Danneris, Sophie; Caswell, Dorte

Exploring the Ingredients of Success: Studying Trajectories of the Vulnerable Unemployed who Have Entered Work or Education in Denmark.

Sophie Danneris* and Dorte Caswell**

*Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University

E-mail: sophiedj@socsci.aau.dk

**Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University

E-mail: caswell@socsci.aau.dk

When looking at clients with a long history of unemployment and substantial health and/or social problems, stories of success in terms of moving from being on cash benefits to getting a job, are limited. Thus, when a client does manage to gain employment or enter education, it represents an unusual[1] story of success seen from a political, organisational and individual perspective. In this article, we investigate empirically what can be learnt about current active labour market policies from these client cases. Methodologically this is explored through interviews with former clients who have managed to find a job despite dealing with complex health or social issues, and interviews with their former caseworkers. Thus, the article aims to provide insights into the crucial elements in making the move from vulnerable unemployed to being ready for a job, as well as finding it and keeping it.

Keywords: Stories of success, welfare to work, vulnerable unemployed.

Introduction

Someone like me can also be of use. We all have a function, so that is really nice. Very good colleagues. That is lovely. I truly had not expected that. So, you feel really lucky to find a place that is that good. I did not think that existed, let us put it like that. So that is fantastic, you know. That sharpens your taste for more. Earning your own money, you know, that is not so bad. For the first time in my life, I manage to do that. Even though I am 29, it is not really until now that my life starts, you know. But it is good. It feels good. (Client M, municipality He, now in flex-job)

When looking at clients with a long history of unemployment and substantial health and/or social problems, stories of successful movements from being dependent on cash benefits to getting a job are limited and unusual. The narrative of the former client above tells the story of one such success, as seen from her own perspective.

In most countries, increasing employment among the most vulnerable social groups is recognised as a major political challenge. Policies aimed at this group of vulnerable unemployed have undergone continuous change in recent decades, moving towards the imposition of more conditions and demands for activation and motivation through economic incentives (van Berkel *et al*., 2017). In Denmark, modifications to Welfare to Work (WtW) policies commenced in the early 2000s with the transition from a human capital approach to a work-first model. Including a significant transfer of the costs of labour flexibility and job insecurity from government to individuals, the dynamics of the Danish flexicurity model changed significantly (Larsen, 2013). Formal policy and government reforms were introduced that increasingly emphasised a work-first approach to not only the job-ready but also the vulnerable unemployed. The expansion of work-fare policies from a more limited group of unemployed to a much broader and more marginalised group of clients is a development we have seen not only in Denmark but also in several OECD countries (van Berkel *et al*., 2017).

Nevertheless – and despite various efforts to boost employability – the challenge of integrating the vulnerable unemployed into the labour market persists. A more or less constant rate of 15 to 25 per cent of the working age population find themselves outside the labour market

(Bredgaard *et al*., 2017). Recent research indicates that the coercive, disciplining and sanctioning elements of workfare policy, which play a substantial and growing role in this policy area, may be less efficient and cause more harm when it comes to the vulnerable unemployed (Caswell *et al*., 2015; EIP, 2017; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). At the same time, recent research has provided new insight into the complex processes that play out in the practices at the forefront of WtW. One contribution is the role of the working alliance, in terms of how good relations between client and caseworker increase the former's engagement and motivation to participate in active measures (Bordin, 1979; Lustig *et al*., 2002; Pruett *et al*., 2008; Haugli *et al*., 2011; Wagner *et al*., 2011). Another explores marginal labour market perspectives and the limited experience of clients as essential dimensions of employability (Danneris *et al*., 2017; Caswell, 2019) although some research into this has been done regarding work placements (Madsen *et al*., 2016). Yet another contribution sheds light on the problems of assuming a linear progression, as current policies do, to the trajectories of the vulnerable unemployed towards the labour market (Danneris, 2016).

Research in WtW policy tends to neglect client perspectives and thus:

> reinforces the tendency to see clients as 'objects' rather than 'subjects' in the process of activation (…). On the one hand this implies that we know little about clients' perspectives on how activation processes are experienced, and the positive or negative impact it has on their lives, opportunities and circumstances. On the other, irrespective of clients' formal room to influence activation practices (which is limited), they do have an influence on these practices (van Berkel *et al*., 2017; 199).

Wright (2016) has recently conceptualised the active welfare subject in two different models. She critically addresses the dominant model that regards clients as 'becomers'. This model draws on a binary perception: passive clients must be made active, unmotivated clients must be made motivated. The agency lies within the active employment system and an idea of a transformative state rather than with the client. According to Wright a counter model can be identified wherein clients are 'beings' capable of making decisions and already taking action.

Drawing on Lister's work, she points to four forms of agency: getting by, getting back at, getting organised and getting out (Lister 2004 in Wright 2016). In our analysis below this counter model and the inherent agency perspective inspire us. The definition of success above thus relates to agency of 'getting out'.

We investigate empirically what can be learnt about current active labour market policies from the narratives of former clients who have managed to find a job despite dealing with complex health or social problems. In so doing, the article aims to contribute more insight into the crucial elements involved in making the move from vulnerable unemployed to being job ready, as well as finding employment and keeping it.

Methods

This article is part of the LISES project (Local Innovations in Social and Employment Services): a four-year research project (2016-2020) investigating how employment services are provided to vulnerable clients in Danish municipalities and the role of and implications for cash benefits recipients in this process (Andersen *et al*., 2017). During the first year of fieldwork, it became apparent that limited knowledge about former cash benefit recipients who had transitioned to employment was available in the municipalities. While this group of clients is relatively small, valuable knowledge can be found in their experiences. However, this kind of data becomes unavailable when job centres lose contact with clients once they leave the benefit system. Initially, this additional data collection and subsequent analysis was framed as a study of positive deviance: what can we learn from the limited number of clients who have been categorised as vulnerable but who have succeeded in stopping cash benefits and entering employment or education?

In order to get in contact with former benefit recipients, we asked municipal caseworkers to reflect on former clients, contact them and ask if they would be willing to participate in the study. Several caseworkers made contact with former clients. Following this, researchers contacted clients, who agreed to participate. It proved challenging to find, reach and recruit

former recipients of benefits who had been categorised as vulnerable and found and held on to employment for at least three months.

In addition to interviewing former clients, we interviewed their former caseworkers about their clients' trajectories. The purpose of including the perspectives of the caseworkers was neither to check the accuracy of the experiences reported by their former clients nor to look for contradictions or disagreements in interpretations of the processes. Rather, capturing the lived experiences of both was an attempt to increase the richness of the data (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011) and include as many nuances as possible in the journey of the vulnerable unemployed to positive job outcomes. The questions mainly focused on the clients' current employment and the process and circumstances leading up to them leaving the benefit system. The interviews took place in various locations, including the local job centre, the informant's private home or a café. Generally, they lasted around one hour, and all were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We conducted 30 interviews with clients and caseworkers, but three of the clients turned out to be outside the definition, leaving us with 12 stories of success (see Table 1 below).

The interviews with these former clients and caseworkers are short, retrospective narratives (Olesen and Eskelinen, 2011). This method serves as an alternative to longitudinal research, as we did not follow informants on their trajectory from recipients of cash benefits to being in employment. Rather, we met them after they had left the benefits system. The use of retrospective narratives provided us with rich descriptions of the transition to work, but also posed the methodological challenge that *'people often reinvent the past to suit their current needs and circumstances'* (Henry *et al.*, 1994: 92). The informants' reported experiences with the benefits system must be understood in light of their current situation as employed. We focus on experiences that can increase our understanding of the relation between the system and individuals in the transition from vulnerable unemployed to work.

The analysis is based on interviews conducted in the autumn of 2017 with twelve former cash benefits recipients and their former caseworkers. Only three informants were male and many are younger women. The data represent eight caseworkers. They all work in the

municipalities (across the six municipalities in the LISES project) and the vast majority studied qualifications in social work.

Insert Table 1 about here

Common to all of the former clients was the fact that they had managed to find work on either ordinary terms or as a flex job, or had entered ordinary education, after a long period on cash benefits (three to ten years), where they all had been categorised in the Danish system as being activity-ready recipients of cash benefits. This category is reserved for vulnerable clients who have substantial problems besides unemployment. Thus, the informants represent the small group of former clients who have (had) complex problems besides unemployment but who managed to leave the welfare system and enter employment or education (see endnote 1). The LISES project has been approved by The Danish Data Protection Agency.

Data analysis

Transcribed interviews were analysed using Nvivo software. Initially we focused the analysis on the main characteristics of the work-first strategy: conditions, work incentives, and sanctions. However, after coding the interviews it became clear that the initial code tree did not capture the overarching patterns in the data. The nodes created to contain excerpts of sanctions or enforcing job searching rules were more or less empty. Coding on discretion and the social work case management strength-based approach were richer, but neither fully reflected overall patterns in the interview material. Therefore, new nodes were added to the coding process in order to capture all the findings.

Two overarching themes emerged from this strongly empirically guided analysis: the importance of clients being active agents (the success of the individual) and the importance of finding a way through the system (system counselling). The following analytical section is structured according to these themes. We have selected illustrative examples to show details of the themes, using the words of the former clients and caseworkers themselves. Our aim was not

to search for representative cases, but rather to apply a critical-case perspective (Flyvbjerg, 1996) that is based on the following condition of generalisation: if we cannot find it in this case, we should not expect to find it in any (or very few) cases (Flyvbjerg, 1996: 150-1). Thus, our sample allows us to make the theoretical argument that if positive or successful elements of WtW policies cannot be identified in the trajectories of these selected clients, it is unlikely that we will be able to find them within a broader selection of clients with multiple problems besides unemployment.

Findings

Before addressing the two themes, we wish to dwell on the first finding of our study: what we did not find. As mentioned before, themes mirroring supposedly efficient active labour market policy (ALMP) tools, such as sanctions, enforcing job searching rules and using evidence-based methods (such as frequent meetings or work placements), were almost non-existent in the narratives of the former clients. We consider this a finding in its own right: the core themes promoted in WtW policies as effective elements of policy were raised only to a very limited extent by the former clients and their caseworkers.

Our starting point in the study was to focus on stories of success in an attempt to find patterns in the data that could contribute to our knowledge of cases with positive job outcomes. We hoped to be able to contribute knowledge about good practice in, or possible ways forward for, WtW policies for vulnerable unemployed clients. Our data turned out to tell a slightly more disillusioning story. However, we do believe that this story can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these clients' trajectories within and outside of the system of the Danish welfare state.

The clients' narratives describe trajectories that encompass positive and negative events or experiences deeply intertwined, and all are far from being linear progression stories. As such, they are in line with the findings of Danneris (2016), who has argued that assuming a gradual, step-by-step progression towards readiness for employment is problematic. The trajectories in this sample also all include a complex mix of actors, job centres aside, such as psychiatry, drug-

abuse treatment, other municipalities, work places, educational institutions, social services and medical actors. Several clients referred to economy and housing as central barriers to their trajectory. Finally, almost all the clients stated 'getting a job or education' as the ultimate success. As such, these clients mirrored the ideal and politically preferred position of labour market participation/education as something positive.

Clients as active agents: the success of the individual

Drive, motivation and belief in one's abilities are keywords emphasised in the narratives of both caseworkers and former clients when asked to describe the factors determining job success.

Beginning with the clients' experiences in their trajectories from cash benefits to employment, a common feature in their narratives was their own role in the process in terms of expressing an attitude aligned with the political and institutional focus on getting of benefits and into employment. As stated above, retrospective interviews about past events are narrated to suit the future (Henry *et al*., 1994). Nevertheless, according to the client in the excerpt below, it was the combination of *luck* and the *wish* to get off benefits that was the determining factor.

Excerpt 1[3]:

I: What do you think has been essential for you to move on? Getting a job?

C: A combination of the last placement in [a protected programme for young people], then of course [mentor] and my friends and myself to a big extent. I think it is important to emphasise that it is also very much about the person you are (…). I want to; I don't want the alternative. I am embarrassed. It is not fun to be on cash benefits and going through this.

> It is not who I am, but if you don't have some of that mentality then it is really hard, then there isn't much help to get. And that is bad. So, but yes, I've been lucky, I have. (Client M, municipality He)

Luck, the right *mentality* and a desire to move on, are necessary ingredients for job success, in this client's perspective. In cases like this, the client is easy for the professional to work with because he/she share the institutional goal: to get (the client) off cash benefits.

In the agency perspective of the counter model (Wright, 2016) the active agency is directed at 'getting out' of the benefit system, rather than resisting (by getting back at or getting organised against) the system. In addition, the agency goes beyond merely getting by. Interestingly, the focus is more on leaving the system than on entering employment. The challenges of being in the welfare-to-work system, such as shame, indignity and stress, have been documented by previous studies (such as Murphy *et al*., 2011). Choosing exit as a strategy to handle dissatisfaction with the welfare system is challenging as it may mean forgoing basic income support (Brodkin, 1997; Caswell *et al*., 2013). While clients in this sample have exited to education and employment, similar patterns of action, oriented towards the exit rather than the destination may be a costly result of a WtW system.

As this client conveys, it is very much *about the person you are* whether you really want to have a job or not. If the latter is the case, *there isn't much help to get*. Previous research has also found that clients' own perceptions of the possibility of exiting welfare systems can provide some of the answer to finding success. A recent longitudinal, qualitative study of 25 cash benefits recipients suggested that the client's own beliefs that he or she can return to work is an important ingredient of success (Danneris, 2016). Similarly, Eskelinen and Olesen (2010) and Christensen and Nordentoft (2011) found that clients' perceptions of whether or not they are capable of changing their situation is central to their progress and returning to work. The narrative of the clients is supported by their caseworkers' experiences. In their interviews, we found a common pattern of pointing to the individual resources of their client. In various ways, the caseworkers stressed the client's will as being of great importance for job success.

Excerpt 2:

I: What do you think was essential for [client] to move on given the resources she had? Now you say that she was a nice girl, and that she...?

CW: She wanted to. She wanted to.

I: She wanted to?

CW: She wanted to get out of this system so badly. She really wanted to, right?

I: What does that mean?

CW: Well, it is the driving force. It is the driving force, right? And it means a lot. Are you positive or negative? Pessimist, optimist and like that. Are you, do you participate, do you take responsibility… It depends on the client's attitude. (CW K, municipality GI)

The caseworker repeats that *she wanted to* three times in answer to the question of what was most essential for the client to move on, going on to elaborate that the *driving force* is the client's *attitude* and actions in terms of participation and *taking responsibility*. However, the narratives of the caseworkers point in different ways to a relational element of the client being or being perceived as an 'active agent'. One caseworker used the concept of lending temporary hope to explain what her role was in one of her former client's trajectory to employment. In this case, the caseworker emphasised the client's attitude and actions in terms of living up to the ALMPs by doing *'(…) everything to perfection, really'*. According to the caseworker, this client initially had little belief in herself. Therefore, despite a clear wish to move on, the lack of belief

was a barrier to success. By doing relational work the caseworker attempted to lend the client temporary hope in order to build the client's belief in herself. The caseworker used her own belief in the client (having it and talking about it) to promote the client's self-belief. This points to an interesting element of categorising the client as an active agent: the role of the caseworker as part of the client's perception of success. A large Danish study sought to identify the most important indicators of employability, following more than 5,000 cash benefits recipients and their caseworkers over four years. The research found that caseworkers' belief in their clients had a significant and positive impact on the latter's employment rates (Vaeksthuset, 2017). Rather than understanding individual agency as the sole explanation of employment success, we argue that believing in job success is linked to structural factors that enable the individual to develop belief that employment can be an option.

In their own narratives, the clients position themselves as the *main characters* in their change over time. Interestingly, case workers support this narrative in some instances:

Excerpt 3:

CW: Well, they are the main characters you know. When you reach the top of the hill, even though empowerment and the whole issue of the client having all the responsibility, that is a bit dangerous at times (…) sometimes they end up in personal failure. However, in these two cases, where they are rewarded 'gold' at the end, that is completely their own merit. It is not the merit of [CW] or [municipality]. (CW G, municipality He)

The perception of clients that the employment system has played a limited role in their success in entering employment or education can be regarded critical and thus problematic from a professional perspective, as these narratives may contain negative references to the system. However, this is not the perspective of the caseworker in the above excerpt. Rather she promotes the narrative that 'it is completely their own [i.e. the clients] merit'. There is a tricky part

to this point: it is difficult to distinguish between caseworkers (or/and institutional systems) who play an important, behind-the-scenes, role in the success of their clients on the one hand, and caseworkers (and/or institutional systems) who play no role, on the other.

Not all caseworkers remain in a behind-the-scenes role, according to the clients. The narratives contain many critical points made by former clients about the overall lack of support from the employment system, the much too frequent replacement of caseworkers or a system that can itself feel like a barrier to success. The narratives do however, also contain phrases such as '*this caseworker really saw me*', '*I feel like she saw me as a human being*' or '*[Caseworker] would do anything it takes for his clients*'. Zacka (2017) points out four values that are essential to balance in frontline work: effectiveness, fairness, responsiveness and respect. The primary focus of WtW policies has been on the first two, measuring the effectiveness of the employment system and working to minimise differences in who gets what through standardisation (Larsen *et al*., 2018). The latter two appear to have received less attention. Interestingly, when these clients point to caseworkers whom they identify as having played a role in their successful trajectory, the values of responsiveness and respect play a central role in their story.

In interviews with both clients and caseworkers, we find narratives concerning the client's active agency and their attitudes. These narratives also contain elements of action, such as clients participating in necessary activities and taking responsibility. According to the caseworkers, this is an important factor in terms of the help provided; if the clients believe in themselves and express the desire to change their situation, the job of the caseworker is easier. One caseworker compared one of her successful clients to clients with drug addiction who, she argued, are difficult to believe in because they rarely do what they promise. This points to at least two possibly problematic aspects arising from this finding. First, how can caseworkers support the development of clients who express limited active agency and is it possible, or even meaningful, for caseworkers to believe in all their clients in terms of the possibility of employment or education success? Secondly, a client's trajectory does not follow a linear progression towards employment but is complicated by processes of ups, downs and turnarounds. Thus, we must assume that the client's belief in him or herself is not a fixed quality that clients either have or not.

Such a belief cannot be expected to be present continuously in interactions between clients and caseworkers.

Summing up, both former clients and their caseworkers point to the active agency of the individual client as being pivotal to job success. However, the concept of agency is ambiguous. The active agency of the client directed at 'getting out' is not only a question of inner motivation and attitude. Rather it is something that is co-produced with caseworkers in specific contexts. Furthermore, it is linked to structural conditions that enable or limit the possibility for the client to believe in employment options. Thus, in order to understand what prompts this type of agency, we need to pay close attention to what lies behind the client's opportunities in terms of actually having the space to 'do something by themselves'. The possible behind-the-scenes work of caseworkers to lend temporary hope, act in line with the values of responsiveness and respect and extend their belief in clients (whenever possible) is, according to the narratives of caseworkers, an important part of the individual success of these clients. The prerequisite for employment success must be regarded as inseparable from the room for participation given to clients within the employment system. The narratives of these former cash benefits recipients demonstrate the importance of their experience of being given a choice, having influence on the process and co-designing it with their caseworkers.

Finding a way through the system: system counselling

A strong focus in policy development within WtW in Denmark is the need for caseworkers to provide competent job counselling. A recent survey across all municipalities in Denmark indicated that the main priority of municipal management is to work closely with companies and possible employers (Andersen and Larsen, 2018). This involves a shift in the professional perspective of caseworkers. Previously, the predominant approach was a social work one that included a strong focus on helping clients to solve their problems. This perspective has since been heavily criticised for failing to focus on the resources of clients (Caswell & Larsen , 2017). The present focus on job counselling includes a call for more knowledge of the labour market. To a varying degree in different municipalities, it has also meant less emphasis on more traditional social work

skills, such as relational skills, communicative skills and legislative knowledge. If job counselling and labour market knowledge are essential in order to move the client from unemployment to employment, we would expect this to be present in the narratives of former clients and/or caseworkers as an 'ingredient of success'. However, when analysing the qualitative data, examples of actual job counselling were very limited. References to guidance on specific jobs or search approaches were also scarce. Instead, a different type of counselling surfaces in these narratives: counselling in how to navigate the bureaucratic and standardised employment system. Rather than stories about being helped to find a job, stories appear to be about how it was (finally) possible to escape the system.

For many who are categorised as vulnerable, gaining a position in the labour market on ordinary terms can pose an impossible challenge. An alternative option could be to take up a position in flexible employment (a flex-job). This option enables clients to work reduced hours; the employer only pays for the limited number of hours the flex-job candidate actually works, while the candidate receives reimbursement from the municipality up to the standard wage for the specific job (Deloitte, 2018). In order for a client to gain a position in a flex-job, the municipal rehabilitation team needs to make the recommendation. Numerous clients and caseworkers in our study describe this as an often long and frustrating process. However, seen from the perspective of the caseworker, the process of providing 'sufficient documentation' and 'informing the case sufficiently' is an essential part of the job; while according to the narratives of the former clients this made little sense to them.

Excerpt 4:

CW: But that is exactly what she found so hard. She would say: 'But why can't you understand that I am not capable of anything'. Well it has to be documented. I can't just stand in front of the rehabilitation team and say: 'Well, [client] can't do anything. So that is why she needs to be granted flexible employment'. That is not how things work. And often that is what

we experience. The clients just don't understand that. So, there is a whole

lot of explaining to be done. (CW K, municipality Gl)

According to this caseworker, the communication challenge is to explain the need for documentation to the client. It is necessary to make him/her understand *how things work* and that takes *a whole lot of explaining*. Our data include a substantial amount of talk on documentation, including references to documentation demanded by other parties or documentation that is no longer valid because it is too old and needs to be renewed or reassessed. While this process is often perceived by clients to be meaningless, sometimes clients and caseworkers tell a story about collaborating in the process in order to get the desired flex-job, and with this a better financial situation for the client.

Excerpt 5:

CW: Well, there was not really a job perspective in the work placement. We

knew that. It was simply to try her out in certain job categories that she had

not worked in before, to present a broad work ability test when we reached

the rehabilitation team meeting because we both thought it could point

towards a flex-job. So, we sort of needed to clarify how many hours were

possible and what were the limitations in relation to the assignments she

has. We needed to figure out where she has the highest performance level,

what assignments would enable her to have the highest number of working

hours. (CW L, municipality Si)

However, a recent evaluation of the reform of flex-jobs and the disability pension from 2013 revealed that the level (what is sufficient) and type of documentation necessary for the rehabilitation team meeting is unclear (Deloitte, 2018). This lack of clarity surfaces in the client cases analysed here. For some clients it is not until they receive a specific diagnosis (physical or

mental) and a fully documented description of their work capabilities that the system is able to act in terms of moving their case closer to a final decision. From a client perspective, some processes consist of one meeting after another, one work placement after another, with no obvious outcome beyond increasing levels of frustration and their experience of meaninglessness. To several clients it seemed that the most important task of job centres is to provide comprehensive documentation of their capability, with less focus on supporting the client in the process towards labour market integration. A decisive turning point in one of the individual trajectories was a doctor's statement documenting a sclerosis diagnosis.

Excerpt 6:

C: Well, let me just tell you why I got the flex-job, because that is not just given to you because you have anxiety and depression as those are not really recognised diagnoses. But I have worked really, really hard with myself and been to a psychologist and psychiatrist and I have been on and off medicine and all that, but I really don't think any of it helped. Really, I don't think I am any better, you know (…) And later on it turned out to be sclerosis. So, after that diagnosis, I got it in the autumn of 2015, it all moved fast forward really. I got into a work placement leading to me being granted a flex-job. I got that last summer (Client D, municipality GI).

Interestingly, frustration with the administrative process in terms of having to produce documentation providing incontrovertible proof of reduced ability to work was highest in cases where the client reported having poor relations or relational continuity with his/her caseworker. This latter problem arises when clients have many different caseworkers over time. A large, quantitative study has recently shown that changes in caseworkers over time is a very frequent occurrence amongst the vulnerable unemployed (over 40 per cent during a period of 60 weeks) and has a significant negative effect on their employment outcome (Rosholm *et al.*, 2017). While

it may be a problem inherent in the current legislation that the level of documentation needed to bring a case in front of the rehabilitation team is unclear, the extent to which this is perceived by clients to be problematic appeared to vary. As pointed out above (excerpt 5), there is a *whole lot of explaining to do*. The narratives of caseworkers illustrate how some of the administrative work goes on behind the backs of clients.

As mentioned above a central element in the narratives of the former clients related to success in the form of escaping the system. For the long-term unemployed the process is by no means easy, nor is it one that is characterised by gradual and linear progress to the ultimate goal of employment.

Clients' trajectories reveal various stages, described by Danneris (2018) as consisting of deterioration, progression, stagnation and derailment, which overlap rather than constitute a continuous, linear betterment of the lives of clients. This is linked to the often frustrating and longwinded administrative process. As one caseworker puts it, it can be '*a process of hope, failure, hope, failure, hope, failure, hope, failure*'. While the administrative processes may be both frustrating and difficult to grasp for all parties involved, caseworkers and their clients have different narratives about the progress made. In some cases, 'success' appeared to come as a surprise to the client.

Excerpt 7:

C: It was just extension after extension after extension. That is the way it has been. I was like: 'Come on!'

I: It felt like you were not moving at all?

C: Yes, more or less (…) and then all of a sudden, [Caseworker] says 'I have put you forward for flex-job now'. And I say, 'Well, that is just incredible!'

> 'Yes, you have to attend this meeting' and then "PUFF" then I got it'. (Client
>
> E, Municipality Ho)

The narratives of former clients and caseworkers are not devoid of labour market-related elements. Intertwined with the theme of system counselling is an element of job counselling, namely the use of work placements. Clients appear to see this dimension as useful but at the same time frustrating in terms of creating a pathway to reaching positive job outcomes. As the previous excerpt indicates, the long and frustrating process leading up to being recommended for a flex-job sometimes includes work placements with *extension after extension*, and sometimes work placement after work placement. The clients' narratives around work placements are contradictory and double-sided. On the one hand, work placement experiences can be possible exits out of the welfare system if the work placement turns into a flex-job or an ordinary job, or leads to other employment options. On the other hand, work placements rarely come with explicit promises of employment but often constitute part of the administrative or clarifying process that documents or develops the (limited) work ability of the client. While Madsen *et al*. (2016) have argued that it is of great value to employers to have a chance to 'size up' the client during the work placement process, the uncertainty of where it might lead to comes at a price for the client.

The narratives analysed above indicate that while the orientation towards labour market options is central to current employment policy and practice in Danish job centres, success is also about escaping the welfare system. 'System counselling' plays a central role in the narratives, which relates to administrative processes rather than traditional social work and/or more labour market oriented work. Trajectories of vulnerable clients are far from linear. From a client perspective, the administrative process can be very frustrating—and given the fact that this occurs in these stories of success, we must expect that similar experiences of frustration and challenge during unemployment trajectories are something that can be generalised to a broader group of clients. An important element of minimising this is communication and relational work. The client's perception of the quality of relations with his or her caseworker correlates with their level of frustration. The current process for being awarded a disability pension and flex-job entails

legislative and administrative processes that challenge the communication required between client and caseworker. Many clients experience limited relational continuity with their caseworkers (Rosholm *et al*., 2017), and client narratives show in great detail both their frustrations with having a continuous stream of new professionals and the positive side of working with a caseworker for whom responsiveness and respect are core values. While we found no evidence that job counselling in itself was a core ingredient of success, the use of work placements does play a substantial role. While they do not alone constitute the road to success, they can play a part if they are meaningful to clients, if followed up by relational work between client and caseworker, and if linked to actual possibilities for exiting the system rather than being merely part of documenting (lack of) employability.

Concluding discussion

The trajectories analysed above indicate that in order to understand policy we need to pay attention to what goes on at the street-level where WtW policies are applied to the unemployed. In the narratives we found no 'successes' relating to currently dominating ALMP policy tools such as sanctions and participation in evidence-based programmes. Rather, we found an overarching theme put forward by caseworkers and their former clients related to the agency perspective. When the client agency is focused on 'getting out', it aligns with the institutional role of the caseworker, enabling them to work together. These individual success narratives were inseparable from the institutional framework and the space given to clients to participate actively in the process. We also found success to be linked to clients being counselled to navigate (and ultimately leave) the system through the values of responsiveness and respect. Van Berkel *et al*. (2017) have convincingly argued that context (policy, governance, organisational and occupational) matter in WtW, but also point towards personalisation of activation services as a tool make policy more successful. While the individual agency is not sufficient to explain the employment success, it does provide an important contribution in terms of having a more nuanced understanding the agency of the client or even the perception of agency as important to understand the success (or lack of) for the WtW policies.

Our ambition was to explore stories of success in order to provide new knowledge on WtW policies. A starting point for our interest in these narratives was a recognition that in the Danish context the employment service often loses contact with clients once they leave the system and thus loses the opportunity to gather experiences retrospectively. This is in contrast to, e.g. the Australian context, where the services provided include post-placement support. Gathering knowledge from clients, not only within the system but also after they leave is a road to reflection and possible change in practice. The policy learning from these narratives of success, specifically the finding that the possibility of agency that aligns the individual and the institutional is pivotal to success, poses an important challenge to the field. How do we ensure a focus on possible and constructive forms of agency for clients, not as something that you have or do not have, but rather as something that can develop and change over time? While there is a strong focus in welfare studies and policy discourse on the responsibility of the individual, it is necessary to understand how this is connected to relations with the professional, the institutional framework and the broader context. The danger in focusing solely on the individual is that it limits possibilities for success to clients who are easy to work with because they have the right form of agency. Regarding our second finding, that of clients experiencing system counselling rather than job counselling, professional competence in providing the client with the sufficient information is based on the values of responsiveness and respect that allow the client to participate, without causing an information overload that renders him or her unable to respond or take part in the process.

Notes

1 Of all cash benefits recipients in Denmark in 2016 who had been categorised as vulnerable (activity ready) and who had left the cash benefits system six months earlier: 11.5 per cent were in paid jobs; 8.5 per cent were off benefits but without confirmed wages; 5.6 per cent had entered education, and; 5.2 per cent had been given a flex- job (AMFORA, 2018).

2 When a client is granted a flex-job, the municipality makes a financial contribution that supplements the wage paid by the company to the former client in a type of employment that is flexible in terms of working time and function and thus adjusted to enable the former client to work.

3 I= Interviewer, C= Client, CW= Caseworker

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