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**Title**: **A hybrid job center. Composite client experiences with employment services between enforcement and care**

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**A Hybrid Job Centre:  
Composite Client Experiences with Employment Services Between Enforcement and Care**

**Abstract**

The present study introduces the concept of *forms of hybridity* as a tool to analyse welfare claimants’ composite experiences with public employment services. In such experiences, the job centre is depicted both as an enforcing *and* a caring institution. The present study demonstrates the usefulness of this conceptual tool by analysing qualitative interviews with Danish social assistance recipients. It shows how the employment system assumes several hybrid forms from the perspective of welfare claimants. The first, the actorbased hybrid form consists of numerous actors where care and enforcement stem from those who participate in the processing of cases. Second, the system/actor-based hybrid form, makes a distinction between an enforcing system and its more caring employees. In the third, a phase-based hybrid form, the participants differentiate between temporal phases of enforcement and phases of care. Our explication of hybrid forms complements the literature by providing a novel means to understand the lived experience of welfare recipients and adds nuance to discussions of social work in activation settings as either enforcing *or* caring.

**Introduction**

*Social assistance claimant, talking about a rule stating that he will be sanctioned if he does not work for 225 hours per year:*

Both myself and my caseworker think that it’s a shitty rule. We thought of finding something for me, for instance, a job at McDonalds—just something—so I would have worked enough hours not to be sanctioned. But we just have to realise that we cannot reach the 225 hours.

The present study investigates a particular kind of experience, namely, situations where social assistance claimants speak about public employment services as—paradoxically at first glance—being characterised by both enforcement *and* by care. Welfare-to-work policies have over recent decades introduced measures such as activation, sanctioning, and reduced benefits as a way to move unemployed individuals into work. Several studies have illustrated how these tendencies create considerable tension between institutional norms and the professional values of social workers on the frontline of policy delivery (Dall, 2018; Nothdurfter, 2016; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013; van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012). Though some studies of less minimal welfare states indicate more mixed experiences (Danneris, 2018; Kampen & Tonkens, 2019; Leseth et al., 2020) several studies on the lived experience of activation policies have found that support from employment services from the perspective of the claimants tends to disappoint at best and cause devastation at worst (e.g., Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1993; Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Patrick, 2014). Public officials in employment services tend to be portrayed as distant and uninterested (Finn, 2021) and some studies have emphasised how services are characterised by superficiality and limited contact with public officials (consisting mostly of brief encounters with work coaches; Wright & Patrick, 2019). The role of the welfare system in such analyses is one of enforcement from a distance: it poses ever-existing *throffers* (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001) and provides low rates of benefits that make getting by difficult (Patrick, 2017). It causes anxiety, stigmatises and *others* claimants, and uses sophisticated techniques of surveillance (Lister, 2004, 2015; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Depictions of the forms of agency adhered to by claimants, likewise, typically pinpoint forms of endurance and resistance, thereby suggesting widespread conflicts of interest between the claimant and the system. Lister’s (2015) oft-applied typology distinguishes between getting by, getting out of, getting back at (the system) and getting organised. Wright et al. (2020), similarly, identified different claimant responses to punitive conditionality and found acquiescence, adaption, resistance, and disengagement to be prominent responses.

Needless to say, such findings must be understood in light of broader macro-level transformations of the employment service systems in most OECD countries during the past decades. Numerous welfare-to-work policy reforms have gradually introduced new forms of conditionality and activation (Lødemel & Moreira, 2014), though different countries have turned towards different activation strategies (van Berkel et al., 2017). Much of the literature (see Hansen, 2017 for an overview) has distinguished between two policy approaches to activation: on the one hand, such policies can be *hard*, that is, based on disciplinary quid-pro-quo programmes, financial sanctions, and the widespread use of benefit reductions to incentivise claimants to leave the system. On the other hand, *soft* policies strive to enhance the human capital of the unemployed by investing in their competencies, attempting to empower them, and encouraging them to attend courses. Dichotomies are useful tools for grasping policy developments across countries. However, they can also contribute to the construction or enhancement of a conceptual opposition between hard and soft logics as mutually exclusive and hence downplay important questions of how such logics co-exist and intertwine in practical terms (Nielsen, 2021). Several recent empirical cross-country studies of activation policies have questioned the meaningfulness of working with homogenous dichotomies and boxes and describe social and employment systems more in terms of fuzziness, composite arrangements, or hybrids (Aurich, 2011; Hansen, 2017; van Berkel et al., 2011). The present study conceptualises such heterogeneity as it is experienced by vulnerable welfare claimants. To them, the public unemployment system sometimes appears as a hybrid of mixed elements. The introductory quote shows how a claimant describes how he andhis caseworker stand united against the system as they strive to avoid ‘a shitty rule.’ We introduce the notion of hybridity to the literature of lived experience of welfare to understand such experiences. We also suggest that hybrid experiences of the job centres point to more diverse forms of agency amongst claimants than appear in the literature.

The empirical material for our investigation consists of qualitative interviews with 42 vulnerable Danish social assistance recipients. Twenty-eight were interviewed individually and 14 during four group interviews. Our transcripts contain numerous paragraphs where informants present certain parts of the employment service system as caring and others as enforcing. The analysis concentrates solely on those paragraphs to identify hybrid forms.

In general, hybridity refers to a phenomenon that comprises different elements. It is widely used in the literature on public sector governance to analyse how public sectors are permeated by several prominent governance logics (Denis et al., 2015; Fossestøl et al., 2015,). For instance, numerous studies have pointed out how public sectors are characterised by a mix of classical public administration principles, logics of new public management, and logics of new public governance (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011; Sønderskov & Rønning, 2021).

However, the concept of hybridity is also useful for understanding claimants composite experiences with employment services. The notion of different hybrid *forms* is especially useful for our endeavour. Forms refers to the variety of ways in which different logics can co-exist (Skelcher & Smith, 2015): Logics may be equally important, or one logic may predominate. An existing hybrid might be stable and robust or—contrarily—unstable and transitional (Polzer et al., 2016; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Skelcher & Smith, 2015). Thus, the mere concept of forms of hybridity invites researchers to investigate how logics co-exist, how boundaries are drawn between them, and how co-existence has several variants.

The key question we seek to answer is what forms of hybridity the employment system assumes from the perspective of claimants. Developing analytical tools to grasp their composite experiences can pave the way for more nuanced descriptions of what the employment system *is* from the position of the claimant, thus providing important insights for social workers (and social work researchers) seeking to balance enforcement and care in their everyday practice (Dall, 2018). In particular, we refer to hybrids when informants depict job centres as having caring *and* enforcing elements (see Zacka, 2018). Two different logics, thereby, blend within the institution. In such instances, the informants tend to describe specific forms of hybridity, that is, particular ways of drawing boundaries to separate aspects of care from those of enforcement. First and foremost, an analytical focus on forms of hybrid experiences enables us to look for and to conceptualize experiences which are heterogenous and composite. Thus, it permits us to draw experiences to the front of analysis, that might otherwise go by unnoticed. Those forms of hybrid experiences constitute the object of analysis for this article.

At this stage, two things are particularly important to clarify. First, the concern of the article is not with analysing what the job centre *actually* is or how it perceives itself. Our interest is solely with analysing how claimants perceive the job centre when they account for their situation. Second, the concern of the article is not with deciding whether claimants find job centres to be mostly disciplinary enforcers *or* helpful caregivers. Instead, full analytical attention is given to situations where the two interact.

In the following part of the study, we introduce the Danish context. Thereafter, we describe the empirical data and the analytical strategy. In the final sections, we present the three different hybrids and discuss avenues for further research.

**The Danish Context of Welfare-to-Work**

Having relatively generous benefit rates,[[1]](#footnote-1) being amongst the OECD countries with the very highest expenditure on public employment services,[[2]](#footnote-2) and stressing *soft* human capital enhancing policy elements more than most countries, Denmark differs from the states analysed by the studies referred to in the introduction. Yet, while unemployed persons’ experiences of disappointment, stigmatisation, threats, and financial hardship are less evident than they are in, for example, the United Kingdom (Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013) they nevertheless are apparent (Danneris, 2018; Pultz, 2018). *Hard* elements such as quid-pro-quo programmes, benefit reductions, and sanctions were introduced in the early 2000s as parts of the active turn in Denmark, and the scope of active labour market policies has been considerably broadened to include new groups of claimants (Larsen & Andersen, 2018; Hansen & Nielsen, 2021).

Evidence from recent qualitative studies taking the perspective of Danish claimants’ points to experiences that are somewhat muddy. The trajectories of unemployed claimants contain experiences of being helped and of moving forward *combined with* experiences of meaninglessness and absurdities (Pultz et al., 2021). Though being heavily regulated by laws characterised by conditionality, several municipalities actively strive to position claimants as co-creators, whose visions are formative for the processing of their case (Larsen & Caswell, 2020).

Many claimant trajectories contain phases of progress as well as stagnation and deterioration (Danneris, 2018). Waiting times are experienced by some as uncertain whereas others experience *temporal agency* and see them as meaningful and useful (Nielsen et al., 2021). Experiences of meaningfulness and progress seem more likely to occur when a claimant’s wish to remove themselves from the system aligns with the institutional framework of the caseworker and focuses on labour market participation (Danneris & Caswell, 2019; Nielsen, 2019).

**Data and Methods** We combine data from focus group sessions (*n* = 14) and individual interviews (*n* = 28) with 42 claimants (24 of whom are men). All of the recruited participants are vulnerable social assistance claimants, who are *not* officially categorised as ready for labour market participation. In Denmark, claimants who are not categorized as ready to work, constitute by far the largest group of social assistance recipients. We recruited vulnerable claimants exactly because we wanted to map complex and hybrid experiences: First, the cases of vulnerable are often quite complicated and they often encounter numerous different system representatives, who all seek to contribute to the processing of their case. Second, on average they receive social assistance for a much longer period of time than claimants who are ready to work. The youngest was in his early ’20s and the oldest was in her ’60s. Eight were below 30 years of age and were therefore formally categorised as young unemployed (see Danneris & Nielsen, 2018). Most of the participants announced that they struggle with problems other than just unemployment (e.g., such as mental or physical illnesses, addiction, or homelessness). The participants were each living in one of five municipalities. Our choice of municipalities was determined by ongoing research collaborations between them and our institution.

We draw on data stemming from two methodologically and topically related research projects. We refer to Dataset I and Dataset II to distinguish between the two blocks. Dataset I contains all four focus groups and 16 individual interviews. The contributors to Dataset I were recruited via job centre personnel in four different municipalities. This process may have caused a selection bias, leading to the recruitment of participants with more positive views on employment services. The number of interviewees who were satisfied with the job centre was, however, quite similar to the approval rating amongst vulnerable social assistance recipients in established Danish quantitative satisfaction surveys[[3]](#footnote-3) (VIVE, 2022). Furthermore, we did not find the Dataset I participants to be any more appreciative of the job centre system than those in dataset II. Dataset II contains individual interviews conducted by a colleague in a different municipality. The 12 interviewees were all taking part in a municipal project focusing on claimants who were vulnerable on more than one parameter of measurement, for instance, both unemployment and mental disorder challenges. All the participants in the project (a total of 45) were given the invitation to participate in a research interview; 12 agreed to do so.

The individual interviews in both blocks lasted between 25 and 83 min and the focus groups lasted approximately 2 hr. Due to COVID-19, some interviews were held online. All the individual interviews were semi-structured and organised around an interview guide that allowed the participants to talk relatively openly about their experiences of social assistance. They were asked a series of questions about their background, their history of receiving benefits, and their experiences of being a claimant. The focus group sessions comprised two to five claimants from the same municipality and either one or two researchers. While the group sessions most likely excluded experiences deemed by the claimants to be intimate, we were able to gather information from their shared reflections and experiences. A commitment to good ethical practice was embedded in the whole research endeavour; all interviewees signed a consent form and were provided with information about the purpose of the study, how the data would be stored securely, and their right to withdraw consent at any point.

Neither during focus group conversations nor individual interviews were participants asked questions about hybridity. The research interest in hybridity emerged after reading the transcripts, which were imported to NVivo and coded in two rounds. For the first, we coded all paragraphs in which the participants described the job centre as caregiving andenforcing. When operationalising the two, we leaned particularly towards Zacka’s (2018) theoretical distinction between caregiving and enforcement.

Elements of the job centre system are often characterised by claimants as either caregiving or enforcing. They are experienced as being more or less sympathetic, more or less responsive towards their needs, and more or less helpful. In keeping with this distinction, we operationalised ‘enforcement’ in all cases where the participants describe the job centre as strict, disciplinary, punishing, or sanctioning, but also those where job centre personnel are described as patronising, distrustful, controlling, or the like. Conversely, ‘care’ was used as a code for all those cases where the participants explain how the job centre has helped them—or tried to help them—with solving a problem or reaching a goal, be it practical and tangible or longer-term. The two codes overlap in numerous paragraphs of the transcripts.

In the second round of coding, we distinguished between the hybrid forms, that is, the different ways care and enforcement co-existed in the participants’ depictions of the job centre. The central question at this point was how claimants describe the caring and enforcing elements of the job centre and how they draw boundaries between them. In 28 of the 32 interviews (four focus groups and 28 individual interviews) we coded at least one of the three identified forms of hybrids. The three hybrid forms are not mutually exclusive. We concentrate our analysis exclusively on investigating the elements of the hybrid forms and their possible relation to claimant’s agency. Therefore, numerous important questions – for instance if some forms of hybridity are more likely to dominate amongst some groups of unemployed than amongst others – are left in the shadows for future research to explore.

**Enforcement *and* Care: Three Forms of Hybridity**

The three hybrid forms represent three main ways in which participants portray the co-existence of enforcement and care. First, distinctions are drawn between actors; second, between the system vis-à-vis actors; and third, distinctions are made between phases of either care or enforcement.

**The Actor-Based Hybrid Form**

The first hybrid form appear as the participants describe the job centre as a conglomerate consisting of a myriad of more or less caregiving and more or less enforcing actors. Thus, some employees are depicted as distrustful and controlling and others as empathetic and helpful. Importantly, this hybrid is based on a principle of contemporality: the caregiving and the enforcing actors co-exist at the same time. Experience of care and enforcement are the results of forms of agency that are taken on by the actors in *the system*. The composition of the specific actors who partake in the processing of cases plays a crucial role in how the claimant experience the system, as is illustrated by the following quote, in which one of the participants describes an encounter with an enforcing job consultant who—from the perspective of the informant—is counter-balanced by the more caring caseworker:

Two days before the corona lockdown, I was at the job centre for a meeting with my new job consultant. He was totally on his toes and now I just had to start a new job placement. It was a completely absurd situation. We were all just waiting for the prime minister to close down the country. And every time they announced a press conference, people went out and panic-bought groceries. And then he wanted me to start a new job placement (…) I was treated with medicine before I had a transplant, and he didn’t think I was in any corona virus risk group. No, no [laughs]. Completely absurd. Luckily, my caseworker attended the meeting as well, and she could see that we were on completely different wavelengths; there was no chemistry between us. It was absolutely absurd.

Here we can see the enforcing and caring elements of the job centre co-existing and deriving from the different actors involved. The participant seems to form an alliance with one actor against the other. Another participant explains how he likes his caring caseworker, in contrast with other newly qualified caseworkers who have ‘all those ideas about how to get me back on my feet, taken directly from their school books.’ Likewise, some participants refer to social media forums where particular job centre employees are highlighted as being particularly enforcing or caring. Others are more focused on differences between municipalities than on differences between persons and draw distinctions between the former according to their perceived level of care or enforcement.

The participants thus portray an employment system that consists of a constellation of more or less caring actors. In the following quotation, the participant describes how job centre personnel can be either engaging or indifferent (see Zacka, 2018 and Finn, 2021 for analyses of indifference):

Some of them are just sticklers for the law. And then you are really just a case on their desk. And it’s weird, you know, as soon as you come in, sometimes then  well they haven’t even gone through the trouble to just browse through your file, in order to have just the slightest idea of what they’re talking about.

This particular participant explains how it feels to be met by indifferent public officials who does not familiarise themselves with his case. He does, however, also state that not all public officials are like that.

**The System/Actor-Based Hybrid Form**

On several occasions, the participants distinguish *the system* on the one hand and the individuals working for the system on the other. Thus, employment services are portrayed as consisting of both a system—an abstract and faceless complex that issues commands—and a range of specific people who handle and react to those commands. Distinctions, in such cases, are not drawn between caregiving and enforcing actors, but rather between an enforcing system and the people hired to enact its will. In this hybrid form, the personnel of the job centre are able to play more or less caregiving roles. This is in keeping with a view held by some scholars of street-level bureaucracy, who have argued that frontline staff sometimes resist organisational pressure to *blame the poor* and try to protect their clients based on moral considerations (see Møller & Stensöta, 2019). One participant explains how his caseworker helps him with ‘being on the safe side, so that I don’t lose my entitlement and things like that.’ In one illustrative passage some focus group participants explain how their caseworkers help them understand the standardised letters and emails they received:

Well, I received a letter at one point. [My caseworker] called me before I had even had a chance to open the letter and told me, ‘I just sent you a letter and you need to know, that this is what it means.’ And holy crap! If she hadn’t called to say ‘you’ll get this letter and you don’t need to worry at all.’ Because when I read that letter, all I thought was  it was just red flags all over the place, and I just thought ‘shit, this will end in disaster.’

From the perspective of claimants, such enforcement originates from the system and the caseworkers implement it only if they are obliged to do so:

Well, a lot of people think something like ‘stupid caseworkers, we don’t want to talk to them.’ I just think (…) that that is her job. You know, she is not out to hurt me because she doesn’t like me. It is her job to be the way she is.

Enforcement, in this case, does not stem from the caseworker. Rather, it flows through the caseworker, and this is an important distinction. One participant states that ‘it is not their [the caseworker’s] fault that things are arranged the way they are.’ Others explain themselves metaphorically, arguing that the caseworker is merely a messenger with his/her hands tied.

Some participants point out that their caseworkers actively strive to protect them from threats and potential sanctions, even if it involves bending the rules. They state that their particular caseworkers—often described as exceptionally passionate or tireless—attempt to shield them from being mistreated by the system, for instance, by helping them to circumnavigate demands for them to be more active. Such caseworkers are therefore regarded as strategic partners. In numerous instances, they are portrayed as caring souls whose good intentions are nonetheless overshadowed and overpowered by the will of the system. The participants expect the system to behave in threatening ways and such expectations persist even when their caseworkers (or others) tell them that they have nothing to worry about. The origins of such expectations are complex; some are based on the participants’ histories as claimants (which include several occasions where they are threatened or disciplined) whereas others originate from, for example, mediated narratives of the job centre system. The following quotation provides an example of the expectations of an enforcing system. The participant in a group interview details how she found herself in a situation where she was almost late for a scheduled meeting at the job centre:

I called my coordinator completely beside myself, a weeping mess because I missed the bus. And then I wouldn’t be able to get to the job centre on time. I actually called for a taxi, which couldn’t come, of course, because there is only two taxis in the whole of the municipality at that time of day. And I thought, ‘shit! They are going to shut off my money.’ Because I have heard that from other places, that if you do that, if you don’t show up [they shut off your money].

The participant phoned the coordinator at the job centre and tried to explain what had happened:

‘I didn’t make the bus and I tried calling for a taxi, and I can’t get in, and it states that I have to attend, and if I don’t attend, you will shut off my money!’ I was in a complete tizz and she said, ‘there now. Relax. Then get the next bus.’ ‘But, are you sure?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘But are you really sure, because I don’t want to risk-.’ […] I ended up calling my former sister-in-law, and then she had to drive me to the job centre, because I couldn’t handle that. I was totally stressed out and I slept bad for several nights after that. Even though I had been to the job centre and heard that, well, it’s alright.

The experiences of the interviewee illustrate a strongly embodied set of expectations of the system: it disciplines and sanctions whenever a claimant break the rules, no matter how minor the offence. Although the job centre personnel assures her on more than one occasion that it is all right that she was running a little late, their expressions of care are trumped by the expectations of the enforcing system.

This part of the analysis has sketched a specific hybrid in which enforcement is associated with a faceless system and where whereas care is associated with the very actors who represent the system. The job centre is thus depicted as a hybrid comprising a system on the one hand and employees on the other. The latter can provide advice on how to navigate the system, shield claimants from threats and sanctions, or act as well-meaning beings who are nonetheless overpowered by the system. In such cases, the job centre personnel are seen as potential allies with resources that help claimants deal with the system.

**The Phase-Based Hybrid Form**

In the third form of hybridity, distinctions between enforcement and care are neither drawn between different actors nor between the system on the one hand and its struggling personnel on the other. Some of the participants distinguish different temporal phases that are characterised by fluctuating levels of enforcement and care, as the following interview extract illustrates:

I had a lot of doubts and, you know, even though I have been treated very well by the job centre for this entire period, you still have a bit of anxiety about [sanctioning]. Because something has changed in the job centre, in [this municipality] at least. The treatment I had before, is certainly not the way I am treated now. There is a lot more sympathy and concern and it’s okay to say no. […] [The last time] they pushed me quite hard and in a way that wasn’t nice. Which I haven’t experienced this time around. And I told them so, and it’s something that they worked at. […] It’s different now. Because I can actually say ‘no,’ [and they say] ‘you know what, it’s not the right place for you, we will find something better.’ Instead of ‘try a little longer, it will get better.’ So yeah. A completely different level of sympathy.

Something changed along the way. As with the other forms of hybridity, participants’ depictions of the system reveal how enforcement and care are intertwined but come to be distinguished from each other over time; that is, they each represent different phases rather than particular actors or a system in relation to persons. We consider these perspectives to be experiences of hybridity, though one might argue that the two logics in such cases does not exist contemporaneously. Nevertheless, the different logics and their interaction are an important element of the participants’ depictions of the job centre: experiences of temporal changes—alternating between enforcement and care—are pivotal for understanding their narratives about the job center. For instance, one participant states that he is happy being where he is in his unemployment trajectory but worries that things will change once again. Another explains that he was optimistic when he recently started working with a new physiotherapist: ‘finally something happens!’ However, in light of previous disappointments, he is afraid there will be a backlash. A third participant says that the job centre is currently taking him seriously, which is very different from how it used to be. He believes that this is because he has recently turned 30 and has been transferred to a new category of claimants. Thus, phases of greater or lesser enforcement or care marks the participants’ interactions with the job centre. These represent a hybridity where boundaries between care and enforcement are drawn between phases in the participants’ trajectories.

There can be several reasons for such shifts. Some are experienced as abrupt, others as more gradual. Others discuss how they have become more competent in navigating the system which limits its enforcing power. Some speak of the influence of external changes, such as receiving a doctor’s diagnosis, being placed within a new formal category, or the implementation of new policies. Much scholarly work in Denmark has focused on the documented harmful effects caused by changes of caseworkers (Rosholm et al., 2017). This is also highlighted by our participants:

The first caseworker I had, we just had a really nice relationship and that was before COVID-19 and all that. And she saw the person behind [the surface] and she saw the things I had been struggling through the last couple of years. (…) And BAM! Then I got a new one.

Boundaries between enforcement and care are, in these instances, not drawn between actors or between the system and its personnel. Instead, the job centre is depicted as a hybrid consisting of numerous phases of care or enforcement. This hybrid is less prominent than the others in our empirical material. We have coded approximately twice and thrice as many of the two preceding hybrid forms, respectively.

**Conclusion**

The present study has directed the readers’ attention to a specific phenomenon: welfare claimants’ experience of the job centre system as a composite consisting of both disciplinary and caring components. The study has introduced the concept of forms of hybridity, which is helpful not only in analysing such encounters but also in becoming aware of them in the first place. In doing so, it complements existing knowledge on the lived experience of welfare claimants in three ways.

First, by emphasising and investigating how care and discipline intertwine in the experience of claimants, the concept of hybridity shows how the employment service system is heterogeneous, its components unfolding in situated processes that can take a multitude of forms as it relates to the lives of claimants (cf. Dall & Danneris, 2019). Thus, the analysis aligns with studies demonstrating how social work is enacted in practices that (potentially) are a balance of discipline and care (e.g., Dall, 2018; Hansen & Natland, 2017) and provides another dimension to the widespread use of dichotomies that distinguish *soft* from *hard* policy approaches (Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1993; Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Patrick, 2014) and employment policies (e.g., Lødemel & Moreira, 2014; Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; see Hansen, 2017 for an overview). The implication of our analysis is not that the dichotomous categories of discipline/care should be eliminated, but rather that an awareness of and attention to the complexities and contingencies of the practices through which such categories emerge should be fostered. The concept of hybrid forms can capture the sometimes overlapping, contradictory, and composite nature of such practices (and experiences) and point a way forward.

Second, by drawing attention to the composite experiences of (some) welfare claimants, the analysis offers nuance to our understanding of the lived experience of welfare-to-work policies. The analysis is not a corrective to previous studies showing more uniformly negative experiences but complements such studies by showing more mixed experiences. Our analysis set out to explore instances where clients’ experience of discipline and care interwove. While these instances recurred, we also gathered data that reflected experiences that rendered the public employment services as *either* disciplinary *or* caring. Thus, we do not claim our findings are representative of the claimant population nor even of a majority of it; we are simply arguing that an analytic openness to more composite experiences is important if we are to understand welfare systems and their effects. Further research is needed on the different types of client experiences of hybridity in different contexts.

Third, our analysis offers insights into client agency. Typologies of client agency have hitherto primarily been based on the premise that claimants and systems are in binary opposition: the former can either endure the latter or try to resist it. Our sketch of the participants’ experience of the three forms of hybridity expands our awareness of outcomes. Some of the participants cooperated or formed alliances with (parts of) the system rather than oppose it. For instance, they formed alliances with caseworkers against the system or other public officials in the employment services. Such forms of cooperation, which have hitherto not been devoted much attention, are crucial for understanding claimant agency.

Our findings have implications for social policy researchers as well as social work professionals (who may be better equipped to discover and understand the complexities and juxtapositions of welfare-to-work policies in practice). More concretely, the participants’ experiences complement existing studies that indicate how individual professionals play an important role in shaping the experiences of claimants (Danneris & Caswell, 2019; Nothdurfter, 2016) and underscore the complexities of navigating welfare-to-work services for both professionals and clients.

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1. Eurostat (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. VIVE (2021). For instance, the Danish Center for Social Science Research concluded that 57% of the vulnerable claimants affiliated with Copenhagen job centres were mostly satisfied with the processing of their cases. In an assessment of all of our interviewees (carried out by our students), 23 out of the 42 stated that they were mostly satisfied with the processing of their cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)