European Journal of Social Work

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cesw20

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To cite this article: Heidi Moen Gjersøe, Katy Jones, Anne Birgitte Leseth, Lisa Scullion & Philip Martin (2023): Refraining from rights and giving in to personalised control: young unemployed peoples' experiences and perceptions of public and third sector support in the UK and Norway, European Journal of Social Work, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2023.2212875

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2212875

Published online: 22 May 2023.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2212875

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Refraining from rights and giving in to personalised control: young unemployed peoples' experiences and perceptions of public and third sector support in the UK and Norway

Å avstå fra rettigheter og gi etter for personlig kontroll: Unge arbeidslediges erfaringer og oppfatninger om arbeidsmarkedstjenester i offentlig og tredje sektor i Storbritannia og Norge

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we present an analysis of young unemployed peoples' perceptions and experiences with public and third sector support in Norway and the UK. Drawing on data generated through qualitative semi-structured interviews, the analysis shows that street level workers' approaches towards clients are important in understanding (dis)engagement with various employment support systems. Taking a 'street-level' perspective as a lens for understanding young, unemployed peoples' perceptions and experiences, we suggest that their voices as (potential) participants in employment services can contribute a further dimension to perspectives that are more usually focused on workers as performers of politics. The paper highlights the challenges of making employment services responsive to young peoples' needs and expectations.

SAMMENDRAG

I denne artikkelen presenterer vi en analyse av unge arbeidslediges oppfatninger og erfaringer med arbeidsmarkedstjenester i Norge og Storbritannia, både offentlige tjenester og i tredje sektor. Basert på data generert gjennom kvalitative semistrukturerte intervjuer, viser analysen at innsikt i frontlinjeansattes tilnærminger til unge arbeidsledige er viktige for å forstå deltakelse og ikke-deltakelse i ulike arbeidsmarkedstjenester. Ved å studere unge, arbeidslediges erfaringer gjennom bakkebyråkratenes tilnærming kan analysen bidra med en ytterligere dimensjon til et perspektiv som vanligvis setter søkelys på bakkebyråkratene som utøvere av politikk. Artikkelen viser utfordringene ved å innrette arbeidsmarkedstjenester som er tilpasset unges behov og forventinger til disse tjenestene.

KEYWORDS
Conditionality; employment service; NEETs; street-level; young people

NØKKELORD
Aktivitetsplikt; Bakkebyråkrater; Førstelinjen; NAV; Unge

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Introduction

A young person's transition from compulsory school into education and the labour market can be a vulnerable phase (Frøyland, 2019; Furlong, 2006). This transition also includes a shift in authorities' responsibilities. Although young people received statutory support from local, municipal authorities to engage in school and training, this is largely compulsory. Beyond this point (or when they are no longer in school) it is largely their responsibility to approach central or more devolved public employment services if they are seeking support to find a job and/or if they need income security and employment assistance.

However, young unemployed peoples' experiences with public employment services (PES) are often reported as negative, and they tend to be dissatisfied with the services they receive (Shore & Tosun, 2019, pp. 35–36). If such dissent is communicated to peers, this can discourage taking up services and benefits (Shore & Tosun, 2019, p. 36), which represents a major challenge for so-called 'hidden youth' (Jones et al., 2018).

Previous research suggests that satisfaction levels with PES are found to have a close link to how the personal relationship with a caseworker is perceived by the client (Frøyland, 2019). Likewise, it is argued that for young unemployed people, obstacles to engaging with PES stem not only from individual factors, (such as qualifications or mental health conditions), but also 'the quality and the organisation of the service delivery' (Van Parys & Struyven, 2013, p. 455). Relevant service delivery qualities include caseworker discretion and approaches towards clients (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016; Zacka, 2017). As public bureaucrats, it has been argued that caseworkers should strive to balance core principles of fairness, respect, responsiveness and effectiveness to avoid a moral disposition that compromise core principles of how clients' needs should be met (Zacka, 2017).

This paper explores young peoples' experiences with frontline workers in the UK and Norway by studying young peoples' engagement with different types of employment service delivery – state and third sector services (UK) and municipal services (NO), respectively. The broader institutional context is a key dimension, which 'influences and constrains the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats' (Kuhlmann, 2019, p. 242) and consequently how services are experienced and perceived by (potential) beneficiaries. Hence, context is an important factor which makes analyses across countries and types of services appropriate (Janssens & Van Mechelen, 2022).

Arguably, municipal social assistance services, which is a last-resort scheme, can provide more tailored, suitable services to young, unemployed people by responding to their complex needs and coordinating better with other local services than compared with state employment services that have a narrower focus, primarily on employment and conditional activities for young people (Andersson, 2022). However, within social assistance schemes clients are mandated to participate in activities 'separate from the ALMP offered to the insured unemployed' (Gubrium et al., 2014, p. 38), and as a last-resort programme, social assistance is generally associated with a lower take-up than more universal social security programmes (van Oorschot, 2002). In addition, social assistance schemes are also considered more stigmatising.

The third sector can play an important role to 'help navigate' citizens' 'right to social security' (Edmiston et al., 2022, p. 775). Third sector organisations' provision ranges from activities such as employment support and training to providing a 'crisis' response to situations where individuals are left with no resources such as young people disengaging in public employment services (Jones, 2021).

While 'street-level' research often focuses on the perspectives of practitioners (Cooper et al., 2015; Kaufmann, 2020; Lipsky, 1980; Raspanti & Saruis, 2022; Torsvik et al., 2022; Vilhena, 2020), the present paper analyses young peoples' perceptions and experiences by drawing on conceptual insights into street-level workers' reductive dispositions towards clients (Zacka, 2017). Although originally conceptualised in terms of the observance of practitioner behaviour, workers' moral dispositions are always experienced by service users' and can shape their perceptions of what constitutes problematic or desirable approaches. *This paper argues that analysing young unemployed*

peoples' perceptions and experiences with street-level workers' approaches across different types of employment support, can offer significant insight into the reasons for their (dis)engagement from such services. As tackling youth unemployment and economic inactivity is high on the policy agenda across European welfare states (Andersson & Minas, 2021), addressing degree and nature of engagement is crucial to making improvements. With a cross national comparison, this paper provides an enhanced contribution to research that promotes 'inter-organisational learning between PES' to stimulate and improve service delivery (Shore & Tosun, 2019, p. 36; see also Dunlop & Radaelli, 2016).

Theoretical approach: 'street-level bureaucracy' and employment service delivery for young people

The aims of public employment services (PES) are (1) to provide services that promote employment for people who experience unemployment, and (2) to administer benefits in order to sustain them while they are not in work. This means that for unemployed people it is not just a matter of taking-up their entitlement to benefits, but also to participate in work related activity and/or training to comply with benefit rules, which can be seen as constituting service provision (Van Parys & Struyven, 2013). 'Conditionality' can be understood as behavioural conditions for receiving a benefit or support, for instance as a requirement to participate in a work-oriented activity (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

A main difference between the issue of take-up of rights and participation in a service, is that the latter is 'often a longer process, entailing repeated interaction between the counsellor and the beneficiary' (Van Parys & Struyven, 2013, p. 456). The aims of providing benefits and services means that PES are characterised by a mix of professional and bureaucratic 'modes of administrative justice' (Mashaw, 1983; Molander, 2016), that influence how street-level workers engage with and are viewed by clients. Firstly, to a large degree services depend on interpersonal accountability (Mashaw, 1983; see also Adler, 2003). Secondly, as a public bureaucracy, they must administer and apply rules and regulations according to formal guidelines, which implies decisions must accurately adhere to certain criteria rather than addressing the particular needs of the individual. Yet these same rules often provide for considerable discretion and latitude (e.g. in the use of conditionality) that enables much of the power of street level bureaucracy. In balancing a mix of such different demands, street level workers develop 'moral dispositions' as regularities in their encounter with clients, that shape how they make use of their discretionary power (Zacka, 2017, p. 32). Over time, there is a tendency for bureaucrats to develop enduring styles of work that young people are likely to be affected by. Zacka (2017, p. 32) identifies three typologies of such styles or dispositions; indifference, caregiving and enforcement, respectively. The styles all have problematic aspects (Zacka, 2017, p. 79): the *Caregiver* brings a 'humane and courteous face to institutions that often appear daunting' and difficult to navigate (Zacka, 2017, p. 105). Caregivers are more likely to bend or break the rules to the perceived benefit of clients, and efficiency and equity are less of a concern. However, caregiving can also reinforce the unequal bureaucrat-client relationship, 'easily morph[ing] into paternalism', whereby clients are not trusted to make their own decisions. The *Indifferent* listens to clients as far as it enables them to extract administratively relevant information, but ultimately seeks to minimise emotional involvement (Zacka, 2017, p. 86). The *Enforcer* is characterised as suspicious, (i.e. expecting clients to take advantage of the system), and rigorously upholds the rules. Enforcement can result in a level of suspicion that can render bureaucrats blind to clients' needs. Hence, these three dispositions or roles are all reductive and 'pathological' and therefore, the street level worker should strive to strike a balance between them (Zacka, 2017).

Within social work literature that is concerned with employment services, frontline workers' recognition of clients' individual needs is seen as vital for self-confidence among users and for establishing good relations to stimulate changes (Frøyland, 2019). To avoid paternalism – one of the pitfalls of

Zacka's caregiver disposition, that can also include more unpredictable services, Frøyland (2019) suggests that there are some vital roles in the services for employment for vulnerable young people. These include follow-up that promote 'a sense of belonging and social participation' and an environment where young people can feel safe. Spending time with young people (and with employers) can be the difference not just in terms of strengthening their capabilities but also their '"functioning" (achievements)', 'to find and master a job when that is something they have reason to value' (Frøyland, 2019, p. 565; 572).

Employment services in the UK and Norway for young, unemployed people

The mandatory activation scheme for young social assistance recipients in Norway

In Norway, the social assistance service at the municipal level operates as a last resort 'cash and care' service, with staff possessing wide discretionary powers (Lødemel, 1989). A mandatory activation scheme for young social assistance recipients aged under 30 was introduced in 2017 for engaging with inactive young people who are not eligible to social security. The scheme places responsibility on the cash recipients *and* on the social assistance service to provide activities and impose sanctions in cases of non-compliance. As such, activation policies require recipients to work closely with case-workers – often trained social workers – to identify their needs, who seek to encourage them into employment or education (Social Welfare Act, 2009, Provision § 20a). The service is co-located and partnered with the Norwegian national employment services (NAV). Hence, in the Norwegian context, 'employment services' have a broad scope.

Many NAV offices have in-house activity centres as part of the municipal social service, designated for young clients who are subjected to mandatory activation. Previous research suggests that young, unemployed people receiving social assistance see employment-oriented activities as providing welcome support and social connection, but they can also be viewed as frustrating when activities are considered neither constructive nor work-related (Leseth et al., 2020; Halvorsen & Hvinden, 2018; Lidén & Trætteberg, 2019; Solheim et al., 2020).

Youth obligation support programme (YOSP) in the UK

The UK's unitary social security system means that there are no last-resort schemes. Hence, young unemployed people are generally filtered through the national service for social security and employment support. All those of working age, (18+ but below pensionable age, with some exceptions for those aged 16/17), deemed capable of work are subject to intensive job searching and other work-related activities in exchange for their benefits. In 2017, the Youth Obligation Support Programme (YOSP) introduced stricter requirements for 18–21-year-old claimants (Department for Work and Pensions, DWP, 2019); from day one of their claim, young people were required to participate in an intensive support programme (including workshops and other work-related interventions). Those remaining out of work for six months were expected to apply for an apprenticeship or take up a work placement (House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2017). The main client facing 'street level' staff, known as Work Coaches, can impose sanctions in cases of non-compliance, and young people are much more likely than other groups to experience sanctions (de Vries et al., 2017).

The closure of many local career guidance services, (which are almost exclusively targeted at people under 25 years) means JCP Work Coaches should pay particular attention to young people (Cagliesi & Hawkes, 2015). However, they 'have been offered little training or professional development' (Cagliesi & Hawkes, 2015, p. 64). The experiences of young people have often been reported as largely negative (Cagliesi & Hawkes, 2015), and many young unemployed people do not engage with the welfare system, due in part to its highly conditional, sanctions-based nature (Atfield & Green, 2019; Author et al., 2018).

Third sector services for young, unemployed people

In Norway, the third sector plays a minimal role in providing substitute PES services for young people. In the UK, the role of the third sector has become extensive in response to the limitations of support available from the PES and other State-contracted employment providers (Jones, 2019; Crisp et al., 2018) and it plays an important role in providing an alternative source of employment support with which young people engage with voluntarily (see, for example Christie & Swingewood, 2022). However, it also provides other support and services ranging from debt advice to emergency food provision.

Methodology

This article draws on two qualitative datasets from the UK and Norway, consisting of interviews that explored young peoples' perceptions and experiences of public employment support in their respective countries. The qualitative research interview is an appropriate method for understanding peoples' experiences and understanding of a certain phenomenon (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014). Moreover, qualitative research enables exploration of 'how things work in particular contexts' (Mason, 2002, p. 1), and through our inter-societal comparison, we explore how particular approaches to activation affect the experiences of young people in Norway and the UK (Kennett & Yeates, 2001).

Although both projects from which we draw our data focused on the experiences of young people who are unemployed, the data sets were collected within different contexts and for slightly different purposes. The UK data consists of interviews with 14 young people (aged 18–25), who, for various reasons, were not engaging with public employment services at the time of interview, despite being eligible for support. Consequently, discussions in these interviews also explored young people's engagement with third sector services. The interviewees were recruited purposively through local (non-statutory) youth services, housing providers and other third sector organisations in a city in the north of England.

The data from Norway draws on interviews with 16 young people (aged 19–29), in four NAV offices in three municipalities in southern Norway. All these NAV offices offered employment support activities to young unemployed people through in-house activity centres. The interviewees were in receipt of social assistance from NAV and subject to mandatory activation. The interviewees were recruited with the assistance of caseworkers. To minimise the risk of gatekeepers assessing the users 'best suited' for interviews, the caseworkers were urged to recruit all types of clients.

The young people in the two datasets differ in that they represent perspectives from the centre (Norway) and the edge (UK) of public employment services. However, as the Norwegian participants received social assistance, they were not eligible for unemployment benefit, which means that although they were engaging with NAV, they were in fact also at the edge of the benefit system in receiving a last-resort benefit. Moreover, there are several similarities in the participants' backgrounds'; both samples included those who had completed secondary education but not succeeded in getting a job, while others had dropped out of school. Some had a history of adverse childhood experiences, including criminality and abuse, while others were caring for their own children, or sick parents.

In both the UK and Norwegian interviews, an active interview approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) guided the discussion towards specific topics such as being unemployed, experiencing support from mainstream services as well as other local services and the interviewees' aspirations going forward. In both contexts, the interviews were carried out in autumn 2018, and were conducted in homes, in a café or other places chosen by the interviewees. In addition, some of the interviews in Norway took place in public offices, while in the UK some interviews took place in third sector organisations. The studies received ethical approval from the University of Salford ethics review panel the Norwegian Social Scientific Data Services, respectively. Participants in both studies gave their written informed consent and understood that the research would be confidential and anonymous.

The analysis involved some key stages. First, we began by producing descriptive accounts of employment support experienced in each context, grounded in data from the interviews with young people. Regular discussion helped to overcome the lack of familiarity the authors had in relation to each other's national context, preventing misinterpretations that may occur in comparative studies (Pickvance, 1986). Second, to 'connect [our] empirical materials horizontally across national boundaries' (Rose, 1991, p. 447), we organised our findings 'vertically' drawing upon theoretical concepts, including Zacka's (2017) dimensions of street-level delivery – a theoretical framework which is 'sufficiently abstract to travel' across different countries (Rose, 1991, p. 447). In the next section we present our findings along these dimensions.

Findings

Young people in the UK and Norway: resisting enforcement

In Norway, young people were concerned with having a good personal relationship with the NAV caseworker and feeling respected. The participants emphasised that their experience could vary significantly from one caseworker to another:

> My current advisor is not the kind of person who looks down on people. My first advisor looked down on me … Every time I came in and asked for something – an application or something like that, he looked at me. He just shook his head every time he saw me. My current advisor involves herself in my situation and understands it. (Ove, 22, Norway)

It was suggested that advisors might be caring and involved, but they could also be indifferent or patronising. The quality of support from an NAV advisor was experienced as unstable, random and difficult to predict. One participant described it as like 'balancing on a knife edge; it can be good, but it can also be bloody bad'. Another one said the following:

> If she (advisor, authors' remark) can make things difficult for me, she does. If she is there when I arrive, then I leave. It is as if she says: 'It is not my responsibility to help you'. (Jon, 27, Norway)

In the UK, fewer interviewees reported positive interactions with the main state employment support agency, Jobcentre Plus (JCP); however, there were rare exceptions where participants emphasised the service's assistance:

> They provide the jobs, and there's like a letter, I think, with jobs on it that suits you, and you go on the site as well, and you apply … it helps a lot. (Jake, 20, UK)

The experience with JCP was often referring to the Work Coaches they had encountered. Overall, the interactions were narrated as quite impersonal, and echoing previous research characterising JCP as 'processing centres' (Wright et al., 2020), young people's interactions with Work Coaches were described as transactional encounters, and associated with pejorative ideas around benefit claiming rather than as a place to access employment support:

> It's just like a big office and you just go in there and just sit there and they ask you questions and stuff and then you go home. (Karen, 25, UK)

Furthermore, the threat of sanctions appeared to be at the forefront of young people's accounts in the UK:

> If you didn't turn up there, they would stop your money … They're not nice people. They act like they're better than you and that makes you feel angry because even though you are signing on, it's not like you've never worked before. It's just not a nice place to go. (Karen, 25, UK)

There was a perception that JCP staff paid little attention to young people as individuals with varied needs beyond the labour market, with some participants questioning the work-focused approach that characterises the UK system. One young man, for example, queried why services were 'just

always interested about work. Why not about your life? … other reasons as well why people are not working, family issues, everything' (Gavin, 18, UK).

Some young people questioned the value of engaging with JCP at all, with suggestions that having to navigate the more punitive aspect of the public employment services were not worth the potential 'rewards' (i.e. the financial assistance). For some, this had led to disengagement from the system:

> They're never off your back, are they? … I just can't deal with it. (Jason, 25, UK)

For others, this had resulted in a decision not to engage in the first place. Several of the UK sample had never interacted with JCP, (despite being eligible to do so), but nevertheless still held negative views of the organisation, based on what they had heard from their peers who were engaged with it:

> I've known [unemployed friends] for a long time and know they've been signing on for a long time … They've not got any work … and they used to always say negative stuff about it. So I just thought well, there's no real point … if they're going through such a bad time with the Jobcentre … then I'm not going to put myself through that then. (Simon, 19, UK)

Young people in the UK: seeking support

Although disengagement from PES in the UK was evident, many participants wanted support and had voluntarily engaged with non-profit, third sector organisations that offered assistance in relation to accessing employment, and also wider support needs. This included experiences of receiving support from specialist 'youth' organisations, as well as support from local government authorities and social housing providers. Experiences with these services were typically described positively and through the accounts of interviewees we can see clear differences in how they narrated their interactions with, and perceptions of, the 'distant' *nameless* Work Coach in JCP and their 'approachable', *named* workers in the third sector. For example, young people often described practical support to access work opportunities that came from engagement with these external agencies:

> There's a lady that usually comes every Thursday … she helps with, if you want to look for a job, things like that … she actually did help. She looked up all the websites, gave me all the links, sent it to my email, so she did help. (Maria, 18, UK)

Notably, the latter was living in a young people's supported housing project that provided a package of wrap around support for residents. In addition to focusing on supporting engagement with the labour market, a highly responsive approach was valued. Indeed, several participants described receiving extensive person-centred care, including financial management, health and well-being, as well as education, training and work support:

> Yes, again, once a week, 'How are you doing? How's your course going? … Do you need to make any phone calls? Any appointments I need to help you with?' Anything like that. (Simon, 19, UK)

In some cases, third sector agencies were also helping young people navigate the public employment service, offering computer space and job search advice, and enabling young people to meet the requirements of their benefit claims.

> It makes it easier when you've got someone helping you do it, because I get dead confused on the phone and it does do my head in, and I get mad and then I'll end up hanging up. (Gemma, 19, UK)

A common feature of these more positive accounts was that the young people felt that they were being asked what they wanted to do, and what they needed help with. This enabling role was contrasted with the punitive approach described above, wherein JCP staff were perceived to focus on 'making' young people engage in particular activities.

In addition, it was evident that the more proactive – and in some cases persistent – outreach approaches of third sector organisations were instrumental in engaging some young people, as one young man described:

> There's probably been bits in the past where I fell off the radar [… youth organisation was] persistent, not giving up, keep going and all that, even if you're fed up, they keep going and try for you. (Simon, 19, UK)

Analogous to the process of sharing negative experiences of the PES, the positive perceptions of many of the third sector providers, and subsequent engagement with these services, was often facilitated by informal information shared through social networks.

Young people in Norway: enduring indifference and enforcement in a caring environment

In Norway, the young peoples' experiences of their everyday, face-to-face, interactions with the personal advisors at NAV and the in-house activity centres were often described positively. Indeed, despite the knowledge that their benefits could be reduced if they didn't engage, the young people perceived NAV as 'a nice place to go to' and articulated a belief in 'responsibilities' as well as 'rights'. As these participants stated:

> It's just a small requirement to pop up at the activity centre in the morning to get money, but it's the social community here that motivates me to come. (Brita, 24, Norway)

> You're not going to be rewarded for sitting on your ass. You can't have these attitudes when you're going into the workplace. (Siri, 27, Norway)

These attitudes hinged on positive experiences with the staff, and a perception of whether the activities provided were helpful in terms of leading to paid work. Particularly at the activity centres, where clients and workers spent significant time together throughout the day and exchanges were based around attempts to create more 'natural' situations, such as sharing meals, relationships with staff were described as being 'informal', 'friendly', with the latter seen less as impersonal functionaries but as 'human beings'. One young man was surprised by the positive nature of his encounters with staff at the activity centre:

> The staff here are very nice people, down-to-earth and very straightforward to talk to. (Per, 23, Norway)

For some, the positive nature of their interactions related to the perception that staff were genuinely invested in supporting them, and really listened to their views. As one young woman explained:

> The staff here … care about us and they even ask for my opinion. (Camilla, 29, Norway)

However, not all interactions were viewed positively, and it was evident that alongside praise for advisors, there were more nuanced discussions around how the employment support in NAV was provided. Although attempts to create more 'natural' or 'homelike' interactions were considered appropriate, there was also something artificial about these approaches, particularly when they were mandatory in nature:

> I don't eat breakfast … But we are obliged to sit there, all of us, and wait until they're done eating … If you don't eat breakfast, that doesn't mean you can come later. Then you will lose money. However, I do not mind sitting there. (Sven, 20, Norway)

These approaches were also criticised by some as a kind of infantilisation:

> It's a bit like being back at school, we have to come and eat and then wash after us, and occasionally we have to go together to the gym … kindergarten sometimes, it feels like. And we can't sit on a mobile while we sit at the breakfast table. (Marte, 25, Norway)

Hence, for young people in Norway, it was not just a case of having a 'nice' caseworker, but that you also needed to 'know the game'. Here, participants were referring to understanding what was expected in return for support, and more specifically engaging appropriately, (e.g. not being late, not missing appointments), to ensure that you avoided a potential sanction:

> I like to do what I am told … if you show that you are dutiful, you may get some help for things. (Sven, 20, Norway)

> You get reduction in the benefit if you do not phone the activity centre telling why you do not come or are late. If you call them, you probably avoid reduction. (Bjørn, 28, Norway)

The use of sanctioning was accepted by some participants as an inevitable consequence for not engaging with the service. However, some participants were open in their resistance to this form of pressure. As one young woman stated:

> It was one day after a job interview, I was not in the mood to return to the activity centre and I [didn't give] a damn [about] giving a message. Then they would probably try to persuade me to come. I didn't care that they reduced the benefit that day. (Marte, 25, Norway)

Discussion

As a prime target of labour market activation policies, the experiences of young unemployed peoples with employment support service providers are important to understand. Across the UK and Norway, the young informants in this study emphasised that care, friendliness, social (meeting-)spaces and helpful 'street-level' workers are important. The Norwegian young people experienced this approach in the social assistance service with in-house activity centres, whereas in the UK, the participants experienced this approach primarily in non-statutory services.

For young people, involvement of frontline staff is arguably a vital ingredient in employment assistance (Frøyland, 2019). However, although caregiving may generally be instinctively viewed as a positive aspect of support, Zacka (2017) argues that intensive involvement and care from frontline workers to their clients might encourage dependency on that support. Caregiving, he argues, can give the client a 'perverse incentive' to present themselves in a helpless light (Zacka, 2017, p. 105). As the findings suggest, comprehensive support combined with conditionality, such as in the Norwegian social assistance service, can be perceived as intrusive, which can have a negative impact on young clients' feelings of empowerment. As young people in NAV were required to engage in activities that purported to create a more informal and supportive environment but were perceived by them to be of little or no value (such as mandatory requirements to eat meals together), these experiences reflect a service that could promote a combination of two moral dispositions among the street-level workers (Zacka, 2017), namely 'enforced caregiving'. Despite the existence of such conditionality, the Norwegian interviewees appeared to see value in their continued engagement with NAV and they continuously negotiate the ambiguities of care and control by co-operating in engagement with the social assistance service. Hence, involvement is vital, but must be carefully carried out to avoid too intensive follow-up that can be counter-productive with the stated purpose of mandatory activation; namely, preparing young adults for work and economic independence.

Although in many ways the Norwegian interviewees were positive and accepting of activation, this does not necessarily mean that activation approaches responded well to their individual needs. Mandatory activation in Norway is largely provided by social workers in a municipal service with wide discretionary powers. However, the scheme is decided by national policymakers, constituting a format that applies to a whole group of young people who are likely to have more diverse needs for services than activation provides alone (Andersson, 2022).

In the UK, the role of Work Coaches in Jobcentre Plus is intended to include a professional mode of administrative justice (Sainsbury, 2008). However, the young peoples' experiences of statutory employment support in the UK were largely perceived as distant and non-responsive to individual needs. Work Coaches were described, not only in terms of being bureaucratic, but the way they were perceived and experienced also resembled the moral dispositions of the 'enforcer' or 'indifferent' worker (Zacka, 2017). The experiences and perceptions of limited tangible support from the JCP in the UK may reflect a strong emphasis on 'narrow' behavioural conditionality, i.e. that the service is solely focused on employment-oriented activities and not on young unemployed peoples' complex needs, which can be linked to the centralised system of unemployment benefits and labour market policies (Andersson, 2022).

Several of the young people in the UK study took a clear stand against the system as individuals who decided not to engage with it. In this way, some British young unemployed people can maintain a sense of being in control and avoiding what is perceived as unwanted supervision. Previous research from Belgium suggests that NEETs reported a lack of familiarity with PES as a reason to dis-engage (Van Parys & Struyven, 2013). The clear stand against engaging with JCP among the British young people suggests other reasons behind disengagement than a lack of familiarity with JCP. The findings in this paper suggest that young people's experiences of encounters depend on factors including how they themselves and the street-level workers behaved and what kind of 'match' they had with the street-level workers. As Zacka (2017) acknowledges, young people's perception of the state and its services are formed prior to, as well as during, face-to-face interactions. As such, *perceptions* of mainstream employment support/welfare receipt appear to be just as important as *actual experience* in understanding why individuals chose whether to engage or not. In this way, the negative experiences of peers can have an influence on British young people to such an extent that they dis-engage or choose not to engage with PES in the first place. This should also be seen in light of the broader, social context of the UK where the state plays a less strong role and there is a larger presence of third sector services. Although the latter do not provide paid benefits, they were still seen as a way 'around' public support.

The broader social context as well as the nature of the service could explain why young people in Norway accept the mandatory activities (Janssens & Van Mechelen, 2022): Norway's 'cash & care' service contains a mix of bureaucratic and professional modes of administrative justice (Mashaw, 1983). Mandatory activation is perceived as both supportive and intrusive; however, this ambiguity, as experienced by the Norwegian young people, may strengthen the inherent tension of the social assistance service. The broader social context of the Norwegian welfare state and the high level of trust in the public institution (Vike, 2018), may imply that young Norwegians participate in mandatory activation because, they perceive public provision as less stigmatising than their counterparts in the UK, even though the social assistance service is generally associated with stigma. In addition, as a service at the municipal level, the social assistance service has a lower threshold for citizens' encounters.

Hence, although labour market activation policies are promoted across different countries, seemingly similar activation 'instruments' in different institutional contexts reflect – through the experiences of young unemployed people – country-specific characteristics (Gjersøe, 2016; Tosun et al., 2017). With a comprehensive activation policy towards young people, one can question whether young, unemployed people are provided the right professionalised and personal career and work guidance adapted to their needs, not just in the UK's employment service, but also in Norway's social assistance service. Youth perceptions of the effectiveness and appropriateness of employment support have much in common across different contexts, and it is critical to understand their needs in service encounters in order to develop responsive employment support for this group.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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