

Article

Activating the person in the changing situation: A dynamic analytical approach to labour activation

by

Helle Cathrine Hansen
Postdoctoral Fellow, PhD
Centre for Welfare and Labour Research, Oslo Metropolitan University
Norway
E-mail: hellca@oslomet.no

Erika Gubrium
Professor
Department of Social Work, Oslo Metropolitan University
Norway
E-mail: erikgu@oslomet.no

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Abstract

For several decades, the turn towards labour activation has dominated European social work and social work institutions. While social work research and practice focused on labour activation have long considered “the person in the situation”, exploring the service users’ experiences at specific moments and contexts in time, we argue that labour activation is an ongoing process involving a complex interplay of factors (structural, social, personal), and that these are shaped by changes and ruptures throughout a person’s life course. Furthermore, the changing situation is not an objective fact, though its meaning is actively constructed by the service user. Asking how participants in a labour activation programme subjectively make meaning of their activation experiences, with reference to changing personal histories and institutional encounters over time, we shift the focus from social work’s emphasis on “the person in the situation”, and we open the concept to include “the person in the *changing* situation” to help enable a more dynamic analysis of the activation process. The concept accounts for the interaction between subjective meaning making and institutional structures and offers, as these change over time. The study is based on fieldwork in the Norwegian labour and welfare services (NAV). We present three participants in the Norwegian Qualification Programme as illustrative cases, each with distinct profiles, to illustrate how service users actively refer to *changing situations* – as these are shaped by time, biography and institutional movement – when making meaning of their labour activation experiences. The findings have implications for social work research and practice, as matters of biography, timing and life course trajectories must be accounted for to gain a more accurate picture of the labour activation experience. A consideration of institutional and life course change also offers a better professional understanding of the complexity of lived experiences when working with service users, potentially enabling a more effective practice.

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Introduction

Social work has long been concerned with placing “the person in the situation”, establishing “what the case is” for the user, including the interaction and interplay between the individual and the contexts relevant to their everyday lives at a certain point in time (Fjeldheim, Engebretsen, & Levin, 2015). Given its increasing dominance in the everyday practice of social work, its shift towards personalization and individually tailored measures, and an aim to fully account for service users’ needs and potentials (Gardner, 2014; Hansen & Natland, 2017; Solvang, 2017; van Berkel & Knies, 2018), labour activation poses an interesting case to question the tendency to explore service users’ experiences with a focus limited to their current situation of *today*. Few studies focus on change over time as a dimension operating in “the situation” – at the intersection between the person and the activation process. In this article, we draw on the longstanding social work concept of “the person in the situation”, and we broaden the concept to include a focus on the person in the *changing* situation. This enables us to investigate the activation process from the perspective of the service users in a more dynamic way.

We argue that a focus on *the person in the changing situation* better represents the complexity of the labour activation process of the service users. This is because the activation process is an ongoing one involving a complex interplay of factors (structural, social, personal), with this interplay shaped in part by changes and ruptures throughout the life course (Gubrium & Hansen, 2019), as well as by changes in institutional arrangements over time. The concept of “the person in the *changing* situation” acknowledges that service users actively draw on their changing life situations, in addition to their movements through changing institutional arenas and positions over time when making meaning of their activation experiences (see Gubrium & Leirvik, 2021).

Using as our case the Norwegian welfare system, users who participated in a national labour activation programme – the Norwegian Qualification Programme (QP) - we ask the following question: *How do participants in an activation programme experience and make meaning of labour activation processes, with reference to changing personal histories and their changing positions within relevant institutions over time?* With this, we aim to demonstrate how system users draw on different

references from their personal histories, as they make meaning of their labour activation – and how meaning-making is shaped and delimited by the interactional effects of changing institutional governance, mantras, rules and regulations. Using “the person in the changing situation” as an analytical concept facilitates the analysis of how service users make meaning of their activation trajectories, which captures their experiences in a more nuanced way than the institutionally predefined conception of activation as a linear process following a series of steps that start and end at certain points in time, which has been dominant in activation policy and practice (Gubrium & Hansen, 2019). Accounting for time and change in the analysis further enables us to highlight the limitations in current ways of understanding and conducting labour activation processes with service users. With this approach, our ambition is to move knowledge production a step forward in order to better reflect and respond to activation service users’ needs.

Social work contexts: The person in the situation and institutional dynamics

Social workers often talk about “the person in the situation”, referring to the individual and their surroundings or environment, focusing, for example, on the social and everyday life contexts of a person engaged in a labour activation programme. Theoretically, “the person in the situation” represents a contextual perspective that accounts for- and emphasizes the interactional process that takes place between an individual and the environment, with the individual seen as taking an active part in this interplay (Aadnanes, 2017; Valsiner & Winegar, 1992). Hence, *the person in the situation* perspective is a contextual dialectic perspective, in which both individual experience and agency on the one hand, and environmental or societal conditions on the other, are accounted for: The person takes an active part in shaping the meaning of the situation, and is not only “a victim of the situation”. Applying this perspective, the individual *and* the situation or environment, including the interaction between the two (Cornell, 2006), constitute the entity for social work practice (Valsiner & Winegar, 1992). However, whether social workers can integrate both individual experience and environmental considerations into their everyday practice and encounters with service users, has been a subject of much debate (Cornell, 2006). This, of course, depends on what social workers include when defining the environment or the situation in service encounters with individual service users – whether it is the family

situation, housing situation, the local labour market situation or more macro level socio-political issues.

When participating in a labour activation programme, “the situation” comprises both the changing activation contexts encountered by the service user and the life experiences the service user brings with them. To be sure, several studies have demonstrated how institutional contexts for activation affect encounters between social workers and service users, as well as their relationships. For example, service users may need to negotiate their identities or adapt to definitions of “the situation” that are compatible with institutionally defined categories and institutionally conceptualized labour activation trajectories (Born & Jensen, 2010; Caswell, Eskelinen, & Olesen, 2013; Hansen, 2019; Hansen & Natland 2017; Mik-Meyer, 2012; Møller, 2012). Other studies point to how predefined and generalized perceptions of- and prescriptions for activation do not necessarily fit the complex reality of service users (Danneris, 2018; Danneris & Nielsen, 2018; Friberg & Elgvin 2016; Gubrium, 2014; Gubrium & Hansen, 2019). Based on service user experiences and their encounters with social workers, several studies also render visible how institutional and structural conditions on the meso- and macro levels have consequences for service users’ everyday experiences in activation (Lundberg, 2012; Hansen, 2020). Even so, the studies primarily focus on the situated context of the service user, as it takes place here and now – the person in today’s situation in the here and now institutional context.

Accounting for change over time

We argue that it is not enough to just look at the person in the situation *now*. Labour activation experiences are *relational* - they change both personally and in terms of changing encounters with various regulatory frameworks and authorities - over the entire life course. A more accurate conceptualization of labour activation accounts, both for people in their changing personal situations (their changing surroundings, contexts, identities and activities), and their encounters with changing institutional contexts, including changes to the person’s position within institutional hierarchies and to the institutions themselves. The everyday situation of a service user before and since their engagement with an activation measure may be a significant reference point for their lived labour activation experience. With a focus on the personal and institutional over the life course, we shift our aim away from using

experiences or effects as evidence of how labour activation works in different contexts. Instead, our focus is on how our research subjects are historically “constituted through experience” (Scott, 1992, as cited in McIntosh & Wright, 2019), i.e., how they actively shape their subjectivities about activation *today* by drawing on and making meaning of their experiences before, now and anticipated later.

To be sure, while subjective meaning making “has considerable free play, it is also oriented to practical, contextual considerations that prevent life course constructions from being capricious or arbitrary” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 209). Welfare system users who participate in labour activation programmes are situated in a changing landscape of institutional prerogatives and strategies, with these changes reflected in the sorts of institutional encounters users have over time (Gubrium & Järvinen, 2013). Thus, the time period during which an activation programme participant enters the institutional systems related to activation, as well as their movement through these systems, with their changing rules and aims over time, are arguably significant in shaping the labour activation experience that they might have. In turn, system users actively draw on these encounters when making meaning of and responding to their experiences in, for instance, a labour activation programme.

Methods

Our study is based on data from fieldwork that took place in four labour and welfare (NAV) offices in south-eastern Norway over seven months in 2013. The Norwegian Research Committee approved the research project. The data consist of transcripts from 34 meetings between social workers and service users who participated in the QP, and individual semi-structured interviews with 16 service users. The service users were recruited to the study by social workers, and were thereafter invited by the first author to participate in individual interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting from one to two hours. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 58 years old, including 21 women and 13 men, with 22 with an immigrant background. They had varying levels of education, from several years of primary to a completed tertiary education. They also had varying professional backgrounds, ranging from a very limited to an extensive work history, also at the upper levels of the labour market. Their civil status varied from single, married or divorced, with or without children, and with current or previous partners living in or outside of Norway.

The topics discussed in the service users' meetings with the social workers primarily focused on the service users' current situation regarding their activation process and progress, as well as their employment prospects. The user's health, housing and family situation were also commonly discussed. Our interviews focused more broadly on the participants' experiences from the QP, as those related to their life situation and background, including previous work-life and educational experiences.

Our analysis focuses on how participants described their current activation experiences through reference to constructed meanings concerning past experiences and future-leaning ambitions. In this way, we start from the basis that their narratives do not simply reflect life as objectively lived today, but are active interpretations and constructed retellings of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present, and within the context of imagined or anticipated futures (Bruner, 1986; Eastmond, 2007; Tavory, 2018). Our study is framed within a phenomenological perspective: We gain an understanding about other people's experiences from the ways they present, and thus make them meaningful, in conversation (Schutz, 1972). Our analysis works from the premise that this process is dialectical: Experience – including experiences earlier in life and imagined futures – shapes the narratives that the research participants present, but they also actively construct and deploy narratives about their experiences in the stories they tell (Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1977). Our analysis explores this dialectical process, with special attention to the ways in which the research participants make narrative connections (Gubrium, 2008) to, and thus make meaning of, their personal histories and their changing encounters with the welfare system – to their *changing situations* – when describing their labour activation experiences and their responses to these.

Following a case study approach (Stake, 1995), our analytical goal was not to present generalized results or to produce typologies, but instead to use distinct cases to demonstrate the diversity of meaning-making when understanding and responding to the labour activation process (Yin, 2009). We selected three cases, each with a different biographical profile, to help demonstrate how service users drew on their personal histories when describing their activation experiences, and how they also drew on changing institutional circumstances when describing their activation trajectories. By shifting the focus to the *person in the changing situation*, we combine

the service users' personal biographies with changing institutional circumstances, including changes to the institutions in which their activation trajectories have been embedded. Each of the three cases therefore possess distinct profiles – differing in past status, professional and personal history, geographical movement, life course ruptures and history of institutional encounters and opportunities – and are hence illustrative of the dialectical and temporal dimensions of the labour activation process.

In the next section, we review the broader changes that took place within Norway's lower tiers of the welfare system, to help provide a picture of the changing institutional context relevant to the findings presented.

Institutional change in an era of activation

We spoke with the research participants in 2013, following a massive overhaul of the Norwegian welfare system seven years earlier. The institutional change that took place resulted in vastly differing activation offers and encounters at the lower tiers of the welfare system, both before and after 2006. All three participants had lived in Norway during the period of institutional change, which may have more or less formed part of their changing situations.

Before 2006, the labour activation programming offered to those service users receiving social assistance, if any, was primarily in the form of municipal workfare arrangements, with little focus on skills building or human capital development (Dahl, 2003). The 2006 "NAV Reform," the largest governance reform ever in Norway's welfare system history, enabled an institutional strategy increasingly driven by the activation of service users into the labour market. NAV was an institution merging the previously separate state agencies of social insurance and employment services with local authority social assistance provisions and activation measures. The reform was specifically aimed at better coordinating the services for "repeat" service users with complex challenges, including those who fell between benefit categories and those who frequently moved between social assistance and other short-term benefits (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2004-2005). For the first time, individuals entering the bottom tier of the welfare system would encounter the sort of employment ideologies and human capital-focused activation programming that had previously been reserved only for the "regular" short-term unemployed (Gubrium et

al., 2014). This change in ethos was reflected in 2007 with the national establishment of the QP (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007a). Initially a one-to-two-year programme, the QP has been targeted to Norwegian residents who are long-term recipients of social assistance, or who have a significantly reduced work capacity and labour market attachment due to complex problems and challenges, including diffuse and undiagnosed health issues. In comparison to social assistance, the programme has been said to be an offer of “more”, in terms of higher benefit levels, improved services with individual and tailored measures and a close follow-up, plus a daily schedule of 37.5 hours, a structure associated with a regular work life (Gubrium et al., 2014). In addition to those activities directly related to work seeking and training, the programming also includes a focus on personal aspects and activities to enhance motivation and self-efficacy (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007b). In other words, the QP represents a bridge between social assistance (the lowest rung of the system) and the labour market.

Along with other welfare measures and arrangements, the QP underwent several changes between 2007 and 2013, placing an increased pressure over time on service users to obtain paid employment (Hansen, 2020). In 2012, the QP was reduced from the initial offer of a two-year programme, with the possibility of adding an unspecified extension, to a two-year programme, in which the extension was limited to six months (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011; 2012). Along with a reduction in programme time, certain activity requirements were attached to specific phases of the activation process: for example, the last six months of the programme were to be dedicated to employment-oriented activity, primarily employment seeking (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011). Thus, there was an enhanced institutional focus on work inclusion. However, on an everyday level, the closeness of the follow up in the QP has also depended on which local NAV office one encounters, with the tailoring of measures dependent on the municipal economy and the local availabilities (Schafft & Spjelkavik, 2011; Hansen, 2019, 2020). The institutional changes that took place in the QP affected the situation for the QP participants in various ways, including for our research participants (see Findings section).

Beyond the QP: Welfare hierarchies from the bottom-up

The QP is an alternative to social assistance for those who are neither entitled to unemployment benefits, nor to the work clarification benefit (*arbeidsavklaringspenger* – AAP) nor to a long-term disability pension. The former requires recent formal employment, whereas the latter two require a formal medical diagnosis. When introduced in 2010, AAP substituted two health-related rehabilitation measures, one with no time limit, and one with a temporary disability allowance (Holgersen, 2017). The criteria for being entitled to AAP were that the person's work capacity was reduced by at least 50% due to health issues, as verified by the medical diagnosis. While this did not reflect a change in eligibility criteria from the previous measures, a distinct "clarification" step, in which a caseworker would map a service user's status in detail, was expected to make the follow-up of service users more effective in terms of moving them into employment (seeking) or onto a permanent disability pension (Holgersen, 2017).

Several notable points of contrast between the AAP and the QP might suggest that the AAP is "higher" than the QP on the NAV hierarchy of programmatic rights and benefits. The AAP is designed to account for the service users' level of work capacity in relation to their health situation, and, in comparison to the QP, service users have access to broader measures for improving labour market prospects, including continuing education. The AAP benefit is also typically higher than for the QP, especially if the user has decent previous earnings. On the other hand, the QP is designed for a close follow-up, with each caseworker having small caseloads in order to have time for the service users (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007b). Initially, and during the time of the interviews and observations in 2013, AAP had a time limit of four years (Holgersen, 2017), and thus, was twice that of the two-year QP limit. Lastly, the "clarification" intake step into the AAP is also one of the required steps in the long process necessary for gaining eligibility to a disability pension in cases of severe and chronic illness. As a permanent measure, the disability pension is, objectively speaking, higher on the NAV hierarchy than the AAP or QP. Most users, who have a permanently reduced work capacity due to severe illness or health problems, will eventually gain a disability pension if they remain in the NAV system long enough. Another "hierarchical" difference between AAP and QP relevant for our study is that AAP is exempted from the income requirements that

follow applications for family reunification in cases of the immigration of family members (see Findings section).

Due to service users' changing situations and circumstances, they may move between programmes, benefits and measures. Moving between the various programmes and benefits in the institutional hierarchy therefore forms part of the service user's changing situation, as we will demonstrate in the next section.

Findings

The three research participants drew on distinct life course experiences and distinct pathways of movement within the institutional setting. They actively used these past experiences and ambitions for the future when ascribing meaning- and responding to their ongoing labour activation experiences today.

Omar: Negotiating three worlds and systems

Omar, now a 45-year-old Norwegian citizen, had migrated from Somalia as a young man. He had had a dynamic and discontinuous migration trajectory since first moving to Norway in 1990. In his first years in Norway, he had had varied employment, from work as a cleaner and dishwasher, to teaching Somali and serving as a support contact for immigrant children. After 10 years in Norway, he had moved to the United States, where he married, had several children and worked in both construction and as a taxi driver. In 2011, he had returned to Norway in order to receive medical treatment for a chronic illness, diagnosed years back when he had first lived in Norway, and which now had drastically worsened. However, because Omar had stayed outside of Norway for a long period of time, he experienced difficulties in the bureaucratic process of obtaining health-related benefits despite being a Norwegian citizen. He had therefore been enrolled in the QP, where he had been for a year, and at the time of the interview he was in the process of being transferred to the AAP. Omar described two goals he wished to realize through the QP: to obtain work and to be reunited with his wife and children, who were still living in the US. He emphasized the role the QP had played in moving towards the first goal. He had passed the necessary course to be certified as an interpreter and had been hired by a company for individual assignments, and was also in the process of obtaining his driver's license.

Omar referred throughout the interview to his entrepreneurial approach to work seeking, connecting this to his previous experience from the US. As he noted, "(In the US), you have to find work, because you don't have many rights when you don't work. ... There is no system helping you, you live by the money you earn." He took care to emphasize his experiences in the US, and distinguished his identity from what might otherwise be apparent from a view only toward his circumstances today, namely as a Somalian immigrant to Norway. He emphasized his earlier activities as a "hard worker" and "survivor" in the US. He followed this focus on his earlier experiences and activities in the US by explaining that, despite his poor health, he was determined to also work when living in Norway. As he noted: "I'm ill, but I don't think it prevents me from working, you can always do something, work with your head, sitting in a chair, or you can drive a car with one arm."

Omar also referred to his identity as a worker and breadwinner *before*, and his changing situation *now*, when discussing the presence of his family elsewhere. As he noted:

I came to Norway because of my health issues, and I wanted to go back to my family in the States, but then my wife started to worry. The doctors said they could not remove the things in my head, because I would risk dying from the operation. I don't worry for my sake, but for my children and for my wife. I think they would have a better future in Norway....I am still young, 45... I don't want to sit at home, and it's better for my children, I have to show them that we have to work like Norwegians... I have to show them that I am the father that earns the money that brings food on the table, like it is in the States.

Omar described how the way he understood his situation changed after his move to Norway. The meaning of his changing situation was not an objective fact – he actively made meaning of his changing situation. What began with a move to address his poor health changed after Omar became aware that he would stay in Norway. His aspirations for improved health began to shift over time to a focus on bringing his family, still in the US, to Norway. Omar's understanding of his time in QP changed in light of his shifting understanding of his situation. Employment was important for him, but as he increasingly recognized that he would be staying in Norway, it became even more important to bring his family to Norway.

While the QP fit well with Omar's emphasis on working and providing for his family, it was less helpful to his desire to reconcile his past roles and relationships in the US with his current existence in Norway – namely, with increasing time spent in Norway, a growing sense of urgency to bring his family over. However, the QP allowance was lower than the income level required to serve as a host for family reunification, a requirement that had been sharpened through a change to the regulations for family reunification. Notably, AAP participants were exempt from this change; the new rules requiring a minimum income to serve as host had not been imposed on AAP participants. As Omar qualified for AAP due to his health issues, this measure therefore became the means through which he could bring his family to Norway. Nevertheless, due to Omar's long-time absence from Norway, his AAP application had at first been rejected by NAV. He had appealed the decision and was heard. At the time of the interview, he was waiting to receive the final decision. As he noted:

They shouldn't put the case on the bottom of the pile – it's important for me that my family come here, because in the Somalian community, most children live only with the mother, but I have to take care of my children, bring them up, teach them what is right and wrong ... I want them to have a future here, and I have to show them the way.

Omar connected his previous role as a father in the US to his goal to continue this role in the future, resisting an easy characterization of him as a "Somali immigrant in Norway". Taking stock of his changing situation, he described losing time in a system that prevented him from "taking care of his children" and "showing them the way".

Omar also understood his activation with reference to his institutional location. He was being "activated" at the intersection of the Norwegian welfare system (NAV) and the rules and regulations of the immigration system, *and* at the crossroads of past experiences and future ambitions, rather than merely in the face of who he was "today". While Omar's two primary goals of economic self-sufficiency and family reunification were seemingly complementary, from Omar's institutional location and given the significance of his past roles and future ambitions connected to family, the meaning of- and means to activation and a job were not so simple. Remaining in the QP, Omar could have continued his promising trajectory towards employment, in collaboration with a social worker who recognized and supported his employment goals. Even so, transferring to the AAP better enabled him to serve as a host for family reunification. While the rules and regulations of different systems, with their

divergent incentive logics, presented a challenge to Omar's personal history and ambitions, his entrepreneurial approach made the most of his past strengths in his changing situation. This enabled him to challenge the rigidity of a NAV system focused solely on the current employment situation.

Hilde: Taking (her) time to turning life around

Hilde was in her late 30s and lived with her husband and her 13-year-old daughter. Unlike Omar, she had lived in the same area in Norway all her life. She had previously worked for many years as an assistant nurse, with a specialization in psychiatry, before moving into the NAV system due to chronic health problems in the past few years. In addition to several physical issues, Hilde had also struggled with depression, in part due to a violent earlier relationship with the father of her daughter. Over the past years, she had moved in and out of various health-related benefits, including AAP, and at the time of the interview she had been enrolled in QP for four months.

Hilde referred to her previous experiences of "waiting for help when in AAP, using this as point of reference when describing her relatively positive experiences in QP.

As she noted:

I was sitting there waiting and waiting, and nothing happened, while my health condition was getting worse, so I had to do something, and I found a rehabilitation centre to which I asked to be referred, but NAV said no, so I complained to the county governor, and then it was accepted.....

Hilde understood her changing situation with reference to a health condition that was worsening over time. She used this primary reference of health to make meaning of her time in AAP, where she was moved "arbitrarily" around by NAV, rather than getting the help she needed.

After having reached her time limit in AAP, she was transferred to QP. She contrasted her feelings of waiting for help before, once in QP, to being "taken seriously" and "treated with dignity". In contrast to earlier, she described QP as positive, due to the close follow-up and support she received from her caseworker.

As she noted:

I feel a different attitude from the social worker in QP. She shows interests in me, asks about my family, what I need. ...nobody (in NAV) asked me that before! She

sees the whole of me, the whole person not only that small part, it's so much more of me that plays into that (activation) process.

Hilde rejected a predefined stepwise activation trajectory that ended with employment, and made meaning of her current interactions with the system and her case worker, as well as of future aspirations, by continually referring to difficult personal circumstances in the past. She referred to an earlier family life and mental health when explaining why she did not currently fit the social norm, and why it was important that the QP was more “rounder than square”, in contrast to the previous experiences she had had with NAV that had lacked flexibility. She referred to- and contrasted against this earlier experience with NAV when describing her current experiences as positive. As she noted, “The frustration and the energy I spent (on NAV) earlier, I can now spend on useful things...thanks to K (her QP case worker) I have managed without medication...and I have reached my goal that was to learn to handle my life with my mental health issues.” In contrast to the AAP, in the QP there was “no pressure”, and she could “take the time” needed to recover from personal difficulties.

Like Omar, Hilde connected past experiences and roles with ambitions for the future when assessing her activities in QP. Like Omar, for Hilde, time and change over time were less an objective quantity and more subjectively defined according to her ability to do the things she felt she needed to eventually recover from past circumstances, and for her to become fit for the labour market. As with Omar, Hilde made meaning of her activation goals with reference to her role as a parent. Nonetheless, while Omar referred to a positive sense of the past marked by close family relations, Hilde understood her changing situation with primary reference to a family history with a violent partner. She linked the flexibility that QP offered to the ambitions she had to “overcome the past”, as well as making a full recovery and regaining her sense of dignity – to strengthen her connection with her daughter. As she noted: “I was given the possibility to follow-up my daughter – to be a mum. I’ve had the energy to do that.”

Where Hilde was placed within the constellation of institutional systems made a difference. Like Omar, Hilde made meaning of her activities in the QP, primarily with reference to strengthening her role as a parent, to past experiences and to her

changing institutional position over time. Unlike Omar, however, who had to contend with an immigration system that granted family reunification rights via earned income, for Hilde, the QP was less about paid work than it was about the ability to move beyond the past, to turn her life around for the future. As she noted, “For me, *this* is work.”

Ahmed: Time is running out

Ahmed was in his late 50s, and had moved from Turkey to Norway 25 years earlier. He lived with his wife and adult daughter, who had extensive care needs. After moving to Norway, Ahmed worked for 20 years at various cleaning firms, but lost his job in 2009 due to financial instability at his place of employment. At first, Ahmed received temporary unemployment benefits in combination with various types of activation measures. After some time, he had begun the QP, where he was attending a basic IT course and Norwegian language classes, in addition to employment-related activities at a work training centre’s bicycle repair shop.

However, Ahmed was approaching the time limit for QP without having obtained employment, and he was therefore summoned to a meeting with a QP case worker and a counsellor from the work training centre in order to plan for next steps. The counsellor emphasized Ahmed’s unfavourable situation *vis a vis* the labour market, referring to the increasing emphasis on strong Norwegian writing skills to access regular employment, even in low-skilled sectors. As the counsellor noted, “*Even* in order to get a cleaning job, you need to have passed the language test (at a higher level).” Ahmed emphasized his extensive, earlier history of work experience when describing his frustration with the demand to improve his Norwegian. As he noted. “I worked for 20 years with cleaning and such things, and there was not much message writing involved.” He also emphasized his age and a shrinking future on the labour market when explaining his lack of motivation to begin another round of activation. As he noted: “It’s too late for me (to learn), I am nearly 60 years old.” Furthermore, he noted that he “felt tired” from his aging physical condition, saying, “...the long working (activation) hours, it’s too much. I work very hard...it is a lot of work to do here, and I get exhausted. In the evenings I have no energy left for my family.” Ahmed emphasized his past experiences from the labour market, and that he felt he was at a later stage of the life course when responding to the demand that he start over by

learning Norwegian. Yet, the caseworker reminded Ahmed that QP required his full engagement, adding that this was also the norm in the labour market.

Unlike Omar, who considered himself “still young”, and was able to draw on an entrepreneurial approach to work-life that he had developed while in the US to envision a future in the labour market, Ahmed emphasized that he had “wasted time” working in a job that had not raised his skill level, much less provided him with the means for a more secure life in his older age. Like Omar and Hilde, Ahmed drew on past roles and activities, as well as an anticipated future, using these to make sense of current activation demands and offers. Unlike them, however, Ahmed interacted with a case worker and counsellor who did not – possibly due to the confines of NAV’s activation framework – recognize how his work-life history and changing “life stage” situation limited his motivation to “begin over again”, both in the activation system and in the labour market.

Discussion

The social work literature has long challenged an institutional and policy emphasis that maps and categorizes system users according to a one-size-fits-all schema, and which focuses less on the lives of system users and more on finding the best link between stimulus and response, to effectively move users into work. Social work challenges this static approach, calling for more focus on the user’s everyday situation when thinking about individual activation trajectories. The social work literature calls for an accounting of *the person in the situation*, and prescribes a more holistic focus that accounts for the social and personal environment of the system user, as this shapes their life worlds, and – in a dialectic movement of meaning-making – from which they actively draw to describe their actions and motivations.

Nevertheless, we argue that a focus on the situation today is not enough, and that, in fact, *today’s situation* is not a static entity according to which system users simply respond and make meaning. Instead, we have demonstrated how participants dialectically and actively make meaning of their labour activation processes by referring and constructing meaning about their changing situations – both personal and within changing institutions – over time. The labour activation participants presented in this article actively draw on different references from their personal

histories, as they make meaning of the labour activation process – on the other hand, this meaning-making has been shaped and delimited by the interactional effects of movement in and through various – and potentially changing – systems.

The three participants presented did not merely understand their activation with reference to their current situations. All were engaged in the same activation programme, the QP, but each made meaning of- and responded to programme activities in different ways, according to the ways they understood their changing situations – current, past and anticipated for the future. Their movement through the varying systems associated with their activation, with their changing rules and aims over time, were arguably significant in shaping how they understood their labour activation experiences. They entered the QP through various institutional pathways, and they made meaning of programme-related experiences and encounters by connecting them to different personal histories. Additionally, they had to negotiate their activities within varying and changing sets of institutional rules, duties and rights, which also resulted in vastly different activation trajectories and processes for the three.

Subjectively speaking, the participants made meaning of their experiences in the QP (often in contrast to AAP) quite differently, assigning vastly different meanings to quite similar everyday activities. Timing, in terms of where in the specific trajectory of a programme the participants were, also shaped the meanings they made of their programme experiences.

While for Omar, the QP provided him with the possibility of better work opportunities, his discontinuous immigration trajectory also meant that he had to negotiate the system of rules and regulations associated with immigration and integration in Norway. His move from the QP into the AAP meant “more” because with the newly tightened Norwegian rules concerning family reunification, the AAP generated the type of income that was accepted by the authorities, as he sought to realize a future where his family could join him in Norway.

Unlike Omar, Hilde did not have to negotiate a parallel system of immigration and integration and, instead, emphasized her family and relationship history, her health

situation and her movements through the system when describing how the QP represented a new start. She emphasized her earlier circumstances and a lack of institutional recognition of her needs when describing how moving from the AAP to QP meant “more” for her, because an extensive follow-up enabled her to “work on herself” and take care of her daughter after a difficult past. Her references were primarily to realize the changes she desired for her future personal life and for the benefit of her family, and in this way the QP represented a positive change.

What had changed for Ahmed was less his own qualifications, but rather, the requirements of the Norwegian labour market, and thus, of the goals of activation. However, in Ahmed’s case there was a mismatch between the social worker’s focus on his situation today in relation to the QP requirements of a full-time programme, and the institutional conceptualization of labour activation trajectories as leading to work inclusion, while on the other hand, where Ahmed subjectively placed himself – as too old to learn Norwegian in order to obtain the same sort of work he had had years earlier. For him, his time (on the labour market) had run out, and he was waiting for retirement. Institutional and case worker acknowledgment of this would have enhanced the repertoire for understanding Ahmed’s changing situation.

Nonetheless, labour activation practice tends to categorize service users into specific need categories (Danneris & Nielsen, 2018; Gjersøe, 2020), as well as institutionally predefining the labour activation trajectories of the service users (Gubrium & Hansen, 2019). These practices privilege the “system” and the professionals’ need for standardization, rather than the service users’ needs and understandings (Born & Jenssen, 2012; Caswell & Innjord, 2011). Service users’ challenges and needs are more complex than current activation policy and practice acknowledge (Caswell & Innjord, 2011; Danneris & Nielsen, 2018). Danneris and Nielsen (2018) highlight the importance of bridging the gap between the political rationality and the service users’ definition of their situations, by bringing the clients’ experiences back into activation practice, and by acknowledging that the service users’ activation trajectories are co-created products of service users’ encounters with institutional systems. Our study contributes to this perspective by conceptualizing labour activation in a dynamic way - as the person in the *changing* situation - and by offering a way to analyse for change. Through the three cases, we have shown how this dynamic analytical

concept of “the person in the changing situation” can be used in analyses of activation experiences in order to enhance the understanding of service users’ labour activation processes.

Returning to social work practice and the person in the *changing* situation, our findings suggest that we should apply a more dynamic view in social work practice, in order to counteract the system’s tendency to standardize and streamline encounters with- and assessments of service users. The analysis demonstrates how experience throughout the life course, and how movement within various institutional trajectories are significant for service users’ understandings of their experiences of – and responses to – activation today. Such a dynamic accounting enables a better professional understanding of activation processes, for example, by focusing more on service users’ personal histories and institutional movements in the intake process in NAV, and accounting for these in the activation plans that are produced. We suggest there is a need to incorporate the service users’ personal histories, as well as their experiences from changing institutional positions over time, in order to respond adequately to the service users’ proper needs.

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