

Article

User involvement or aspirations management? Work counsellors' strategies in guiding newly arrived refugees into the Norwegian labour market

by

Zubia Willmann-Robleda
Researcher II, PhD
Center for Intercultural Communication (SIK)
VID Specialized University
Norway
E-mail: zubia.willmann@gmail.com

Memory Jayne Tembo-Pankuku
Associate Professor, PhD
VID Specialized University
Norway
E-mail: memory.tembo@vid.no

Keywords:

activation policy, refugees, social work practice, aspirations management, user involvement

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31265/jcsw.v18i2.570>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

The last decades have seen a shift towards activation policies in welfare states, such as the introduction programme for refugees in Norway, a qualification programme that seeks to prepare refugees for the labour market. In the last decade, the programme has placed further focus on refugees' duties rather than their rights, as it had previously done. This article examines the strategies that work counsellors in the introduction programme use to 'activate' and assist newly arrived refugees as they prepare to enter the Norwegian labour market. We focus on how work counsellors guide and motivate refugees in this process. We draw on 10 semi-structured interviews with work counsellors in various municipalities in southwestern Norway. We suggest that the activating strategies used by the work counsellors may be seen as a form of aspirations management to get the refugees to shift their aspirations toward those the work counsellors see as more achievable within a shorter period, to get them more quickly into the labour market. We suggest that unchecked power dynamics, together with increasing time-pressure on work counsellors, may be at play leading them to exert too much influence, and leading to user involvement practice not being properly implemented.

Keywords: activation policy, refugees, social work practice, aspirations management, user involvement

1. Introduction

Globally, the shift towards activation policies over the last decades has been a major development in the welfare states. Activation policies are meant to empower users, often through user involvement strategies, so as to make them active participants as they work toward employability. This trend has been associated with slogans such as 'the enabling state' (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1989) and 'the workfare state' (Jessop, 1994). A characteristic of this trend has been that users are increasingly required to partake in courses, training internships and so forth to access their rights to receive benefits and services outside of formal employment. One target group of such activation policies includes refugees, who, compared to other immigrants, face greater challenges entering the labour market (Bakker et al., 2017; Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2018; Spehar, 2021). Bratsberg, Raaum and Røed (2017) note that immigrants in general, and refugees in particular, tend to be overrepresented in jobs and sectors with great instability, and are more sensitive to downturns than the native population. Immigrants also seem to have a higher chance of losing their jobs when downsizing occurs and a greater tendency to work in unskilled jobs (Bratsberg, Raaum, & Røed 2018). To counteract the negative consequences of unemployment, Norway pursues an active labour market policy through the introduction programme for newly arrived refugees (*Introduksjonsprogrammet*). The programme is part of a set of activation policies for refugees that aims to increase their labour market participation, and familiarize them with Norwegian civic values through Norwegian language and society lessons, and compulsory work internships (Fernandes, 2015; Hagelund & Kavli, 2009). In relation to the shift towards activation policies, there has also been a shift towards increased career counselling (*karriereveiledning*) in the introduction programme in recent years, thereby leading to the creation of work counsellor positions and work teams in various municipalities (Integreringsloven 2020, § 11). Previous research has argued that the introduction programme is a result of a shift towards a logic of assimilation visible in integration policy regimes around Europe, which have moved from focusing on immigrants' rights to highlighting their obligations and duties (Fernandes, 2015; Hagelund & Kavli, 2009). While this is considered a programme with empowering elements, it has been argued that the empowerment that these 'activation' programmes promise its participants is overshadowed by their mandatory aspect and the uneven power relationship between welfare workers and

the users (Fernandes, 2015; Watarai, 2012). However, more research is needed to better understand the relationship dynamics between the participants and the programme employees (counsellors), as well as the role that employees in the introduction programme play in the 'activation process' of the participants. Hence, this article seeks to contribute to this body of literature by examining the strategies that work counsellors in the introduction programme use to 'activate' and guide newly arrived refugees through the introduction programme, while getting them ready to enter the Norwegian labour market.

2. Introduction program for refugees

To have newly arrived refugees quickly enter into employment, and ensure that they become financially independent, is an important political goal in Norway. However, government white papers continue to document worries regarding refugees' long-term dependency on social benefits (Meld. St. 30 (2015–2016)). Fangen (2006) noted that refugees often start at the bottom rank of the new social hierarchy, where their pre-existing competence is often not recognized. Statistics show that most refugees take an average of 5–10 years to find stable work that is related to their qualifications in the Nordic countries (Karlsdóttir et al., 2017). This is one of the reasons the Law on the Introduction Scheme for Newly Arrived Immigrants was developed in 2002. Initially, this law was introduced as a voluntary scheme for the municipalities; yet, starting in 2004, it became obligatory, as introduction benefits (*introduksjonsstønad*) were the only way newly arrived refugees and their families could get a fixed income from the state (Djuve, 2011). This scheme was established with the goal of strengthening newly arrived refugees' opportunities to establish themselves in the Norwegian labour market and society (Djuve et al., 2017). The law stipulates that, when refugees and their families aged 18–55 years old settle in a Norwegian municipality, they have the *right and duty* to attend the introduction programme, which lasts for approximately two years (Lillevik & Tyldum, 2018). The programme is meant to 'meet participants' needs for basic qualification', which includes 'Norwegian language training, insight into Norwegian social conditions and preparation for employment or education' (Integreringsloven, 2016). In addition, programme participants also must participate in work internships to practise the language, and become acquainted with the Norwegian labour market. A core element of the

introduction programme is the individual plan, which has received increasing attention over the last years. This refers to an individual plan for each participant of the introduction programme, which is discussed and drafted between the refugee and the work counsellor. According to the introduction law (§ 6): '(t)he plan must be designed on the basis of a mapping of the person's training needs, and of which measures they can benefit from. (...) The plan should be reviewed regularly, and always in the event of significant changes in the individual's life situation and in cases when the introduction program is extended' (Introduksjonsloven 2005, § 6). This plan also aims at establishing a career/labour market goal that the participant seeks to work toward in the duration of the introduction programme. The individual plan is the primary way that the programme seeks to implement the goal of user involvement (Eide & Bjerck, 2018). However, it is also stated in a government's circular that 'if the participant disagrees with the municipality (about the content of the plan), it is the municipality who decides what the plan should include' (Meld. St. 30, 2015–2016).¹

As part of the more overarching goal of the introduction programme, The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (*Kunnskapsdepartementet*) has established that 70% of the nationwide participants of the programme should be active in employment, or study for one year after finishing the programme (Guribye & Espegren, 2019). Statistics show that in 2020 the national average was approximately 60%, with a great variation between municipalities, where over the years some have achieved the goal, while others have been significantly under it (Guribye & Espegren, 2019). Municipalities that fulfil this goal are rewarded with the title of being 'the best' at integrating refugees, and with further refugees to settle and integrate. Municipalities receive what is called an integration grant (*integreringstilskudd*) per refugee they settle, and this grant can be used in whichever section of the municipality that they see fit. Hence, this economic incentive for resettling refugees, together with the quantitative goal previously mentioned, has been highlighted as putting additional pressure on municipalities, and one could say

¹ Norwegian original: "om deltakeren er uenig med kommunen, er det kommunen som bestemmer hva planen skal inneholde. Kommunens beslutning må begrunnes og dokumenteres" (Rundskriv G-01/2016: 40).

by default the employees of the introduction programme, to get refugees quickly into work or study (Guribye & Espegren, 2019).

At the end of the introduction programme, participants who are not employed, or in education, are transferred to the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) to receive social benefits and participate in further qualifying programmes, training or courses of different kinds, to get them closer to entering the labour market (Djuve et al., 2017). This implies a further dependence on the state. Therefore, an emphasis is placed on work internships during the introduction programme so that work experience can be added to their curriculum vitae (CV) and, in some cases, can lead to potential further employment and independence from state support. A successful work internship is regarded as a step towards employability. However, several barriers exist to such internships, and at times, some refugees have expressed dissatisfaction and resistance to these, feeling that they are being used as cheap labour with little benefits for themselves (Kobberstad, 2020). Dilemmas can arise between realizing rapid employment to ensure income and self-actualization with long-term social mobility (Kobberstad, 2020). This, and many other reasons, can hinder motivation for work internships and call for work counsellors' skills to successfully engage the participants. This article explores some of these issues.

3. Activation and aspirations management

The change towards activation policies is deemed to be one of the most substantial shifts to European welfare states in recent decades. Citizens are expected to take responsibility for their own circumstances, and in turn are made responsible for the future of the welfare state (Hagelund, 2016). Scholars have equated such a shift in responsibility towards the user as one that can be understood through Foucault's notion of governmentality, in which the state governs at a distance through self-steering individuals (Dean, 2003; Rose, 1999). Increased user involvement through devising individual plans for (re)integration into the workforce may be seen as one of these forms in which the responsibility has been shifted to the user (Hagelund, 2016). We find that these individual plans, and an emphasis on user involvement, are also often mentioned in relation to the introduction programme for refugees, one of the activation policies of the Norwegian welfare state. Yet, it is essential to point out the

asymmetrical power relationships between the case worker and the user, and that despite an increased focus on user involvement, the case manager as a representative of the welfare state is the professional and the holder of information (about the labour market). In addition, the case workers also often have the last word when it comes to the activation of the user, as the government circular states: 'if the participant disagrees with the municipality (about the content of the plan), it is the municipality who decides what the plan should include' (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016, 40). This is also given that the reception of benefits is often conditional to participating in activation/qualification programmes and courses (such as the introduction programme) (Hagelund, 2016; McDonald & Marston, 2005). Hence, meetings between case workers and users may still be framed as 'sites of governance' (Cleton & Schweitzer, 2021), in which case workers may aim to manage users' aspirations and goals in relation to their (re)integration into the workforce. Aspirations management is a term that has been increasingly discussed in migration studies. It refers to the ways in which governments seek to influence migrants' aspirations and, thus, decision-making in line with immigration policy (Carling & Collins, 2018). Governments use aspirations management as part of their international migration governance through information campaigns. These campaigns may focus on preventing irregular migration, but arguably also discourage potential asylum seekers (Schans & Optekamp, 2016; Watkins, 2017). Drawing from Eule et al. (2018), Cleton and Schweitzer (2021) defined the role of return counsellors in Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) as intermediaries in 'spaces of asymmetrical negotiation' (2021, 2) between migrants in precarious circumstances and immigration authorities. They argue that the AVR counselling sessions are seen as 'sites of governance', in which return counsellors selectively provide information that they deem necessary for the migrant. According to Cleton and Schweitzer (2021), the intended purpose is to manage the migrants' aspirations so that they decide that leaving the country through the AVR scheme is the best solution (Cleton & Schweitzer, 2021). For this article, we draw on the concept of aspirations management developed by Cleton and Schweitzer (2021) to analyse the strategies that work counsellors use in counselling and information sessions, with refugees participating in the introduction programme, while guiding them into work or study.

4. Methods and data collection

The data used in this article are part of a larger project on the aspirations and labour market participation of newly arrived refugees in Rogaland, Norway (MAVI project²). The project aims to gather the perspectives of a variety of actors, from asylum seekers and refugees themselves to members of civil society and religious organizations, as well as work counsellors working with refugees. This article is based on 10 semi-structured interviews with work counsellors in several municipalities in Rogaland County in southwestern Norway. The participants were chosen due to their work with the labour market participation of newly arrived refugees, either at the Refugee Services of the municipality or in the social welfare office (NAV). Their qualifications ranged from bachelor's and/or master's degrees, the majority within but not limited to the social sciences, although few had studied social work. We mostly interviewed counsellors who specifically helped participants obtain internships through the introduction programme and whose task was to guide the participants towards either education/qualification or work. Their job, then, was to match programme participants with relevant internships whenever possible. We also talked to a few employees from NAV working with those who had finished the introduction programme and had been transferred to NAV, as they were neither in work nor education. Their task was to guide these users towards the different qualification or training programmes that NAV has and, in some cases, to find and match them with relevant internships, as these are also among the many qualification programmes at NAV. We also included two participants with leadership positions within the Refugee Services office to provide us with their leadership perspectives as a complement to the perspectives of the counsellors working 'on the ground'. For the purposes of this article, we have called all informants *work counsellors*, even though, on paper, some had different job titles³ and some additional tasks.

2 MAVI - Mellom ambisjoner og virkelighet. Arbeidsmarketstilknytning blant nylig ankomne flyktninger i Rogaland (*Between aspiration and reality: Labour market integration of recently arrived refugees in Rogaland, Norway*) 2019-2023. Supported by the Rogaland County University Fund (Rogaland Universitetsfondet), this project has the objective to further our understanding about the different aspects of labour market integration amongst recently arrived refugees in the Rogaland region in Norway. This research project includes statistical analyses using register data and questionnaire survey, as well as in-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders in the process of integration. Website: www.maviproject.no

³ The job of guiding the refugees through the introduction programme and into education or work has different names from municipality to municipality. In larger municipalities, there may

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each, and the topics discussed were among the following: the relationship with the refugees, the barriers and opportunities that newly arrived refugees experience to enter the Norwegian labour market, how the work counsellors guide and help refugees through these barriers and opportunities, how the work counsellors work with refugees' aspirations and what barriers they encounter when working with the refugees' aspirations. Eight of the interviews were conducted in summer–fall 2020 by the authors, and two of them were conducted by a student writing her bachelor's thesis within the MAVI project under the supervision of an experienced researcher in the project. The research participants were recruited through a contact that one of the authors had previously established with an employee at the regional level, who then put the authors in touch with potential participants working in a variety of municipalities and NAV offices in Rogaland County. We chose to interview employees from small, medium and large municipalities, as we wanted to obtain a variety of perspectives. Six informants worked in larger municipalities, and two each worked in medium and small municipalities. However, a comparative perspective between the various municipality types is outside the scope of this article.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviews were conducted through video calls, although a few were conducted in person whenever the situation allowed. Prior to interviews, participants received consent forms and were asked to either sign them if meeting in person or to say whether they gave their consent on tape. All interviews were recorded with the informants' permission. The project was reviewed and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and followed the required guidelines for anonymization and data protection.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently analysed following the thematic analysis method, consisting of six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) Familiarization with data (reading and listening to interviews several times), 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Organizing into main themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5)

be an employee who has this as their sole task, and thus their position is called work counsellors (*Jobbveileder*). In smaller municipalities, employees have more of a variety of tasks, as they have less staff that can specialize on a particular role, hence their position may be called introduction supervisor (*introduksjonsveileder*) or programme counsellor (*programrådgiver*).

Defining and naming themes and 6) Presenting and discussing results. For the analysis, an inductive approach was used, meaning that the codes and themes were identified without using a hypothesis or leaning on some theoretical frameworks (Silverman, 2005; Thomas, 2006). We sought to leave our theoretical knowledge aside as much as possible, albeit being aware that this is not completely possible, and let the data speak for itself. There were several themes found, so therefore an initial literature review was conducted to see whether some of these themes and findings had already been discussed in previous literature. A collective decision was made, highlighting two main cluster of themes as being the ones that previous studies had paid a limited amount of attention to: one of these cluster of themes was the one explored in this article. After deciding which themes to explore further, that is when we started to look into theoretical discussions to help us analyse and interpret the data. In what follows, we present our findings and discussion around them.

5. Findings: Work counsellors' strategies to 'activate' newly arrived refugees

According to the work counsellors, the work with refugees started with an initial interview to get to know them, create trust and, most importantly, map out the refugee's education, qualifications and work experience. They also enquired about their labour market aspirations. This was followed by designing a plan and goal for the qualification programme. Throughout the duration of the programme, which lasts approximately two years, but can be extended up to three years, the refugee and work counsellor meet on a regular basis to discuss the programme progress, make additional choices regarding internships/training and education and, if necessary, adjust the plan. The work counsellors explained that their primary goal was to get refugees through the introduction programme successfully. This means making sure they attend all the compulsory hours of the Norwegian language and society courses, and completing the work training. Toward the end of the programme, they would guide them either towards further education, whether it would be finishing primary or secondary school so as to then go on to a vocational training or higher education whenever relevant, or otherwise guiding them to find relevant employment. Many work counsellors mentioned that their overall goal was to guide and assist refugees towards acquiring stable work so that they can become financially independent. In

what follows, we discuss the three main strategies that we found the work counsellors used in their efforts to 'activate' and assist the refugees in completing the introduction programme, and in getting ready to enter the labour market.

5.1. Reality orientation

The work counsellors explained that much of their work involves giving the participants of the introduction programme information about the Norwegian labour market, and guiding them through the different requirements and steps to take towards getting a job in Norway. This could mean learning the language, reaching the required level and getting their previous qualifications approved, but could also involve going back to school and taking a vocational course or a university degree, which often takes several years. Many referred to this as 'reality orientation'. The work counsellors present themselves as experts in the Norwegian labour market. They often have to explain to the participants the formal and structured nature of the labour market and the importance of having formal qualifications for almost any job, even lower-skilled jobs in Norway. This is especially the case since their goal is for refugees to get a stable and decent-paying job to secure a strong connection to the labour market. In addition, the work counsellors reported that they also assess the participant's aspirations in light of this goal when discussing the individual plan, and more often than not, they will guide them towards more realistic aspirations, as many refugees come with high aspirations:

We inform about what is possible and help them draw some possible maps in a way. 'What does it mean if you were to choose to go that way there?' [...] I think no one should be able to say to anyone that 'no, you can never be a doctor' or 'you can never be that, it will not work for you'. We are more involved in supporting people in that. But... *with reality* and with reality glasses on.

As this work counsellor portrays, while they never explicitly say that participants cannot achieve certain dreams, they may suggest a path that in their view is more realistic. This might initially imply signalling the difficulties associated with achieving their high aspirations. Along these lines, another welfare worker also mentioned that it was important not to 'crush people's dreams' but to gently get the participants to find 'realistic' aspirations. This gentle nudging includes first explaining the steps the refugee must take to achieve their dream, and highlighting the years that it would probably take them to be qualified for their aspired job. As part of the reality orientation, the counsellors could, in certain cases, explain to refugees that their

professional experience and qualifications are not transferable to the Norwegian labour market, and that they need to acquire new qualifications. Some counsellors gave the following example: If someone wants to work as a doctor in Norway, whether they were one before or not, will often require going back to university for many years; thus, they might instead suggest that the refugee go into nursing or another health-related profession with a shorter study time.

Work counsellors also mentioned the progression of language learning as another factor that is considered when assessing realistic aspirations. They reported that, in some instances, they will involve the refugee's language teacher in discussing the language progression of the refugee to determine what is realistic for the participant. This often means telling the refugee about their slow language progression, and highlighting the number of absences they have in class, if necessary and applicable. The work counsellors noted that most refugees who are above middle age and those with lower education seem to progress slowly in their language learning, which is seen as one of the main obstacles to their aspired job. Several work counsellors highlighted language as one of the major obstacles, even for the higher educated: 'Yes, barriers, that is the language. First and foremost, it is that which often puts a stop for many, that they are told (by the employer) that they have to learn more Norwegian before they can give them a job.'

Often, the work counsellors assess the refugees' aspirations based on their knowledge of the Norwegian labour market, in addition to the refugee's language learning progression, their education level, age, family circumstances and motivation. The primary emphasis seems to be on the timeframe it would take the refugee to reach financial independence. In a way, the work counsellors do not dismiss that the aspirations are impossible to reach, but rather that they will take longer to be realized, making them unrealistic for the participant.

5.2. Working with demotivation and resistance

In connection with the strategy of reality orientation, the work counsellors explained that this is often a downturn for many refugees, as they begin to realize that they will have to change career goals and expectations regarding work in Norway. For some,

they will have to go back to school, university or take a vocational course, as their education or professional experience is not transferable to the Norwegian labour market. This leads many to become demotivated as this work counsellor explained:

As we see very often, people come with a zeal and enthusiasm and dreams and very big ambitions, and then suddenly, they crack because they see that it is not so easy to learn Norwegian. [...] [Some say,] 'but, can I not just go and ask to get a job somewhere? I want to work as an electrician; I have done it for 30 years. [And we answer,] 'Yes, but you are not allowed to screw in a light bulb in Norway if you do not have electrical certification.' So, yes... We have had such examples many times, and it is clear that it can take the energy out of many. And then they say, 'But, I'm 50 years old [...] I cannot start school!'

The counsellors explained that given that many are unable to continue with their previous vocations, many develop apathy regarding language learning and the qualification programme in general. They pointed out that much of this demotivation and resistance may be triggered by several other factors, such as feelings of shame related to losing the social status they had in their home country tied to their profession. As the work counsellors explained, for someone with several decades of work experience, having to do an internship without the potential of a job on the other side can feel disheartening and potentially meaningless, especially if they are aware of the challenges that fellow refugees often face in finding full-time employment.

Work counsellors narrated that they often encounter resistance towards the internships/work training, which is a compulsory element of the qualification programme. This often seems to be related to a lack of understanding or confusion about the purpose of such internships. Many refugees feel that they are being taken advantage of by their employers, given that they are working for 'free' (even though the refugees still receive the welfare benefits for participating in the qualification programme). Many also have expectations of being offered a job after finishing the internship, and once that does not happen, they develop a resistance to doing yet another internship that will probably not be successful. They then become demotivated to continue. Thus, another aspect of the work counsellors' job also involves finding ways to motivate refugees by explaining the purposes of the internship and the various parts of the introduction programme, as one work supervisor recalled:

One spends a lot of time explaining why we have these internships, [even] if it does not provide work, what can they get out of it. We have to motivate them to somehow

think a little further ahead and get something on the CV, how important it is, get a reference and experience. Get networks. That it can open up other possibilities.

Like this counsellor, many other counsellors explained that they have to spend a significant part of the counselling sessions with the refugees, finding ways for them to see the benefits of the internships and trying to spark their motivation to engage in them. Several related that, even if they try to be very clear about the purpose of the internship and that a job offer is not guaranteed, many participants are disappointed when the offer does not come. Given that refugees share their experiences amongst themselves, some work counsellors have experienced that the resistance towards the internships has become a shared discourse among some groups of refugees. This leads even those in their first internship to not be motivated, and put little effort into learning and networking. The work counsellors explained that for others the resistance to the internship is related to the refugees being shy due to their low language skills, and maybe also their little experience in formal work. The latter, the work counsellors recounted, seems to particularly be the case for some women, whose work has always involved taking care of children and the household, and who never had a formal job. The following section presents specific strategies for motivating these women.

5.2.1. Motivating refugee women to work

Many work counsellors reported that they find it difficult to motivate some refugee women to undertake internships and work in general. This is particularly the case among those who were housewives all their married lives and those who have no previous formal work experience. As the counsellors described, the motivational work with such women often starts by discussing their strengths and highlighting previous experience they may have in taking care of the household and children. Several work counsellors believed that some women are resistant to entering the labour market because they do not see themselves as employees, especially in a new country with a new language and society, given their lack of formal work experience. In these instances, counsellors seek to explain the benefits of paid work in Norway. If they still sense resistance, they motivate them to look at other areas where employment would benefit them. For example, they explain how the internship could empower them as parents so that they can help their children, or how it could help in the home and society through learning Norwegian and understanding the workings of the society.

The counsellors highlight these efforts as contributing to the women's knowledge of- and confidence in manoeuvring in Norwegian society, which could eventually give them the confidence to also participate in the labour market. As one counsellor mentioned, 'If they then do not think that they are going to work or have any education, one tries to come in and tries to motivate them to the idea that it is wise that you contribute.'

Several work counsellors mentioned that refugee women have several reasons why they do not want to do internships and work. Some of these include the gender roles in their culture and traditions, where the women usually stay home and do the care work, while the men are the breadwinners. One work counsellor explained:

The other challenge I see is that...it is also connected to culture; where they [the women] come from, it is the man who goes to work and provides for the family. So, some of them come with the same thought processes. That is part of my work, to try to raise awareness: 'No, here in Norway you will work, same as your husband. We have a welfare system to take care of, and it requires that most people are in [paid] work.'

In this quote, we can see the economic explanation for why all women need to work in Norway – to contribute to the welfare system – merged with the cultural explanation of why some refugee women are resistant to working. Another work counsellor similarly explained that the reason why many refugee women might not be motivated to work is due to the pressure to stay at home and do the care work:

There are quite a few challenges they [women] face [to entering the labour market] because they have a higher share of the care tasks in the home. At the same time, they are often controlled by negative social control – I think that is a bit in the back of my mind there – what kind of opportunities they actually get and what is expected of them. [So] how one manages to facilitate that they should focus on themselves and their real opportunities for the future [is important].

Thus, as this work counsellor explained, one of the ways to motivate refugee women to work is to guide them to think about what they would like to do personally, present them the opportunities they have in Norway for education and work, and paint them a picture of what their life could look like. Therefore, motivating women can also be accomplished by emphasizing what this could mean for their self-realization.

5.3. Warnings about negative consequences and authoritative strategies

Whenever the other strategies were not successful, and that participants still resist completing their internship or are not making enough effort, work counsellors

mentioned that they resort to their last strategy and least favourite. This entails giving warnings about the possible negative consequences of not completing the internship:

If you oppose yourself to the internship, you do not want to be part of it, then you, strictly speaking, are turning down the introductory programme. And you can turn it down, but this has its possible negative consequences later.

Refusing internships automatically disqualifies refugees from the introduction programme, which disqualifies them from receiving financial assistance. Other work counsellors have a stricter approach, as the following quote shows:

[...]as a rule, you should have user participation. [tells the story of a participant wanting to quit the internship] He said to me, 'No, I'm just quitting [the internship]. I'll start primary school again.' And I had to say, 'Now you have to finish the internship; otherwise, you get an absence report and lose the whole introductory programme.' [...] the goal is always to provide information, get the participant to see for themselves where the opportunity is, where is the realistic goal. [...] But sometimes, one must go in and be more like, 'No, this is not possible', or just tell them, 'Now, you do this. If not, the consequence is great', and cross your fingers that they listen.

As this work counsellor alludes to, on certain occasions when providing information about the risks of not completing the internship does not seem to convince the refugee, they attempt a strategy in which they tell the refugee straightforward what they should do, in hope that they will do it. This is despite the fact that work counsellors cannot force refugees to complete the internship or introduction programme. In what follows, we delve into the discussion of the above presented findings.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to examine the strategies that work counsellors use in 'activating' and assisting newly arrived refugees in entering the Norwegian labour market. The analysis reveals that work counsellors utilize three primary strategies: reality orientation, motivation work and warnings about negative consequences/authoritative strategies. These strategies are slightly different from each other but somewhat interrelated, and are employed separately or in combination. These strategies are not always employed in the order in which we present them here. The discussion takes into account the concept of aspirations management (Carling & Collins, 2018; Cleton & Schweitzer, 2021), in connection to discussions around activation policies and power dynamics between case workers and users (Haugelund, 2016; Rose, 1999; Dean, 2003).

While the goal of these meetings between the work counsellors and the refugees is primarily to provide an overview of the labour market and give information about what is realistic, they can actually be seen as 'spaces of governance' (Cleton & Schweizer, 2021), in which counsellors seem to have a specific goal. Despite an emphasis being placed on uncovering refugees' aspirations and involving them in devising their individual plan, in practice, work counsellors seem to focus more on the duration of achieving financial independence from state support rather quickly, and less on properly involving refugees in these decisions, although this is not always explicitly stated. It is essential to be aware of the power differentials in the meetings between work counsellors and refugees. Work counsellors are representatives of the Norwegian welfare state; on the other hand, refugees have the right and the *duty* to attend the introduction programme; hence, we can see the power imbalance between the work counsellors as those with significant authority in the programme, and the refugees as participants of the obligatory introduction programme. Due to their expertise and knowledge of the Norwegian labour market, work counsellors lead the conversation and guide the refugees towards what are deemed realistic choices. Inherent in their role is the possibility to influence and, to a certain extent, readjust participants' aspirations towards those they see as more achievable within a shorter period. In several ways, this can be seen as a form of *aspirations management* (Carling & Collins, 2018) of the refugees' goals. Work counsellors act as mediators in these 'asymmetrical negotiations' (Eule et al., 2018) between the interests of the Norwegian welfare state of getting everyone qualified and quickly ready for work, and the refugees' aspirations. Previous research on newly arrived refugees shows disappointment and demotivation growing as they start to be made aware (through the introduction programme) of their new reality, and the challenges they may start to encounter in pursuing their aspirations (Willmann Robleda, 2020; Djuve, 2015). Previous research on Somali refugees and their experiences with activation programmes has shown that they find many of the activities imposed on them lacking meaning, that their needs and wishes are not heard, which in turn lead many to feel demotivated and apathetic in relation to preparing for employment (Friberg & Elgvin, 2014). As a result, demotivation and apathy among newly arrived refugees can lead to a lack of desire to continuing to gain the necessary skills to enter the labour market, and potentially become dependent on welfare benefits for longer (Røe, 2011). Previous research among Syrian refugees also shows that a loss of subjective

social status that often accompanies having to start all over in exile can even lead to depression and apathy (Euteneuer & Schäfer, 2018).

Our analysis shows that whether refugees' aspirations are seen as realistic (by work counsellors) is determined by a timeframe measurement, that is whether they are achievable in a particular timeframe, and not necessarily on the refugee's capability to achieve them. As the goal of the introduction programme is to help refugees achieve financial independence, the work counsellors' guidance seems to focus on avoiding anything that would lead to dependency on state support for a long time, especially for those without higher education and in advanced age. The Norwegian welfare model depends on high labour market participation, and over the years, the government has stated the need to get newly arrived refugees *quickly* integrated into the labour market (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016). In addition, as seen above, municipalities, and in turn employees working in the introduction programme (such as the work counsellors), are experiencing further pressures from the state to reach the goal of having 70% of the programme participants in education or work one year after finishing. This may lead work counsellors to push for faster qualification paths for refugees. This could influence work counsellors' emphasis on the timeframe for reaching financial independence, even at the expense of refugees ending up in low-paying jobs, as these require shorter qualification periods. This echoes Schram's (1995, as cited in Halvorsen, 1998, p. 60) argument that measures to prevent financial dependency on the state, such as activation programmes, are linked to 'a new ethic of labour discipline that forces workers into low-wage jobs'. Indeed, previous studies have shown that many immigrants, in particular refugees, are highly represented in jobs that require limited qualifications and skills (Cortés & Tessada, 2011; Olsen & Askvik, 2021). These low-skilled jobs are often where many refugees conduct their internships during the introduction programme. It is important to mention that some internships have the goal of language practice, in addition to an experience in the labour market, which may make the place of internship not as important. We also cannot ignore several other factors that explain why refugees end up in lower-paying and more unstable jobs and sectors, such as language limitations and discrimination from employers (Orupabo, 2008; Røe, 2011). However, it is plausible to consider the role that the guidance received during the introduction programme plays in their future job placements. Assessing whether this factor could

potentially lead to refugees being overrepresented in low-skilled jobs is beyond the scope of this study, but the reality orientation strategy could, to some extent, explain such occurrences.

Our analysis suggests that, when it comes to their work motivating refugee women, work counsellors also seek to promote some of the fundamental values of the current Norwegian welfare state, such as gender equality. This is done by referring to family politics, aiming towards families with two working parents (Kavli, 2020). This is also connected to a public discourse that depicts Norway as a pioneer in gender equality, where both parents working full time is the norm. This is in addition to the public discourse on immigrant women often being depicted as trapped within their cultural norms and, therefore, needing help to leave these behind and adapt to the host country (Bakker et al., 2017; Bredtmann & Otten, 2013; Gedalof, 2007; Koopmans, 2016; Roggeband & Verloo, 2007). While it may be true that some women (as well as men) may experience significant pressure from family members and the community to comply with certain norms, it is important to highlight the dangers of having such a generalized belief that can lead to stereotypical categorizations of refugee women. This can have an influence on the way that counsellors approach these women, and show them the opportunities they have in the labour market. It is also important to point to research that shows many migrant women expressing that they have more opportunities for education and work in Norway than they had in their home countries, as well as more freedom in general. This is further supported by studies showing that many migrant women pursue higher education after arriving in Norway (Alghasi et al., 2020; Nadim, 2014).

Looking at the strategy that we have called *Warnings about negative consequences and authoritative strategies*, which consisted of informing refugees of the (primarily financial) consequences of not completing the internship, here it is again important to highlight the power imbalance between the work counsellors and the refugees. As with the reality orientation strategy, providing information, especially of negative consequences, cannot merely be seen as a neutral activity. Particularly not when we are talking about newly arrived refugees, which are in a vulnerable socio-economic situation in Norway, by being dependant on the state for subsistence. Therefore, we highlight that such a provision of information, as well as more authoritative strategies,

may instead be perceived as a warning by the refugees, particularly given that it comes from a government authority representative. Furthermore, making choices out of fear of the consequences may again have an impact on refugees' choices and motivation, leading them to adjust their aspirations to something more accepted in the view of the work counsellors, as well as on their overall motivation to enter the Norwegian labour market.

The comprehensiveness of welfare states, such as that of Norway, has been often criticized for its 'intrinsic paternalism aspects', which have led to an increase in user involvement policies, in an attempt to involve and put more responsibility on the users (Hagelund, 2010, 2016). User involvement is seen as a way to empower service users to make sure they have a say in how the services are provided, and to change power relations between users and providers (Adams, 2003; Lee, 2001). User involvement has also been implemented into the introduction programme, primarily through the individual plan that is discussed and adjusted between the work counsellor and the refugee. However, our analysis shows that the strategies used in 'activating' and assisting newly arrived refugees in entering the labour market seem to have limited elements of user involvement. Instead, they show more elements of aspirations management, in other words, how the work counsellors seem to influence and manage refugees' aspirations to make them be in line with what the counsellors think is more realistic and achievable. Given that the work counsellors as representatives of the welfare state tend to have the last word, it can be argued that despite the focus on user involvement in the introduction programme, refugees have limited room to make significant decisions about their future and realizing their aspirations. This echoes previous research, which shows that work counsellors (in this research called introduction supervisors or *introduksjonsveiledere* in Norwegian) are often in disagreement with the participants (the refugees) about the contents of the individual plan, and that they found it difficult to find the right balance between giving participants control over the content, and directing participants into what they thought would be a good option (Djuve et al., 2017). In addition, this same study found that many introduction supervisors do not take enough time to design the individual plan together with the participant due to increasing time pressure, and because according to them it would take time away from more central tasks. This is particularly the case when there is disagreement about the content of the individual

plan (Djuve et al., 2017). Another study shows that while participants are involved in the design of their individual plan, they rarely have an overview over the real options that they can choose from. Participants are often given the choice between two alternatives when designing the individual plan, and these are often very similar to each other. As a result, they are not given the prerequisites to be able to make informed choices, which is the premise of user involvement (Lillevik & Tyldum, 2018).

While we have taken a critical perspective and focused on the challenges in this article, this does not mean that there are no success stories; after all, approximately 60% of all refugees who finish the introduction programme are either in work or education one year after finishing it. However, it would be important to examine which types of employment we are speaking of here. In any case, this shows that some strategies may work better for some refugees than others. Nevertheless, with this article we have attempted to show the importance of critically examining the 'activation' strategies used with newly arrived refugees, in particular the often unchecked power dynamics that may lead to exerting too much influence, e.g., thereby leading to the management of aspirations by work counsellors. Furthermore, we have also sought to highlight that the goal of user involvement in the introduction programme may end up quenched in practice due to the increasing number of tasks, and thus time pressure placed on work counsellors, as well as the increased number of users per work counsellor. While this article seeks to contribute by highlighting the downsides or consequences of certain activation strategies, more research is needed on the success stories and on best practices to learn about what works best and for whom.

References

- Adams, R. (2003). *Social Work and Empowerment*. Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/9781403905512/Social-Work-Empowerment-Practical-Adams-1403905517/plp>
- Alghasi, S., Eide, E. & Simonsen, A. H. (2020). *Hvem er 'vi' nå? Medier og minoriteter i Norge*. Cappelen Damm Undervisning.
https://www.cappelendammundervisning.no/_hvem-er-vi-na-9788202562670
- Bakker, L., Dagevos, J. & Engbersen, G. (2017). Explaining the refugee gap: A longitudinal study on labour market participation of refugees in the Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(11), 1775–1791.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1251835>
- Bratsberg, B., Raaum, O. & Røed, K. (2017). Immigrant Labor Market Integration Across Admission Classes. *IZA Discussion Paper*, 10513.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2911451>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bredtmann, J. & Otten, S. (2013). The Role of Source- and Host-Country Characteristics in Female Immigrant Labor Supply. *MPRA Paper*, 44544.
<https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/44544/>
- Carling, J. & Collins, F. (2018). Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 909–926.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384134>
- Cleton, L. & Schweitzer, R. (2021). 'Our aim is to assist migrants in making a well-informed decision': How return counsellors in Austria and the Netherlands manage the aspirations of unwanted non-citizens. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(17), 3846-3863.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1935813>
- Cortés, P. & Tessada, J. (2011). Low-Skilled Immigration and the Labor Supply of Highly Skilled Women. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 3(3), 88–123. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.3.3.88>

- Dean, H. (2003). Re-conceptualising Welfare-To-Work for People with Multiple Problems and Needs. *Journal of Social Policy*, 32(3), 441–459.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279403007062>
- Djuve, A. B. (2011). *Introduksjonsordningen for nyankomne innvandrere: Et integreringspolitisk paradigmeskifte?*. Fafo. <https://www.fafo.no/zoo-publikasjoner/introduksjonsordningen-for-nyankomne-innvandrere?highlight=WyJkanV2ZSIsImRqdXZlbn2JsaWdhhdG9yeSIsImRqdXZlMTEuMTAiLCJkanV2ZWZsZXJrdWx0dXJlbGxlliwiaW50cm9kdWtzam9uc29yZG5pbmdlbnludHVrc2pvbnNvcnRuaW5nZW5zliwiaW50cm9kdWtzam9uc29yZG5pbmdlbnVull0=>
- Djuve, A. B., Kavli, H. C., Braanen Sterri, E. & Bråten, B. (2017). *Introduksjonsprogram og norskopplæring. Hva virker for hvem?* Fafo. <https://www.fafo.no/zoo-publikasjoner/fafo-rapporter/introduksjonsprogram-og-norskopplaeringdjuve>
- Eide, T. H. & Bjerck, M. (2018). *Veiledning i introduksjonsprogrammet En kvalitativ studie i fem kommuner* (ØF-notat 02/2018; p. 48). Østlandsforskning. <https://www.ks.no/globalassets/fagomrader/innvandring-og-integrering/introduksjonsprogrammet/rapport-fra-ostlandsforskning.pdf>
- Eule, T. G., Loher, D. & Wyss, A. (2018). Contested control at the margins of the state. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(16), 2717–2729.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1401511>
- Fangen, K. (2006). Humiliation Experienced by Somali Refugees in Norway. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19(1), 69-93. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fej001>
- Fernandes, A. G. (2015). (Dis)Empowering New Immigrants and Refugees Through Their Participation in Introduction Programs in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 13(3), 245–264.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2015.1045054>
- Friberg, J. H. & Elgvin, O. (2014). *Når aktivering blir ydmykelse* (Fafo-rapport 2014:43). FAFO. <https://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2014/20390.pdf>
- Gedalof, I. (2007). Unhomely Homes: Women, Family and Belonging in UK Discourses of Migration and Asylum. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33(1), 77–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830601043513>
- Gilbert, N. & Gilbert, B. (1989). *The Enabling State: Modern Welfare Capitalism in America* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.

- Guribye, E. & Espegren, A. (2019). Resultatmål i Introduksjonprogrammet for flyktninger. NORCE. <https://www.ks.no/globalassets/fagomrader/forskning-og-utvikling/fou-rapporter/Resultatmaling-i-introduksjonprogrammet.pdf>
- Hagelund, A. (2010). Dealing with the Dilemmas: Integration at the Street-level in Norway. *International Migration*, 48(2), 79–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2008.00497.x>
- Hagelund, A. (2016). The activating profession: Coaching and coercing in the welfare services. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 29(7), 725–739. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-02-2016-0036>
- Hagelund, A. & Kavli, H. (2009). If work is out of sight. Activation and citizenship for new refugees. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 19(3), 259–270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928709104741>
- Halvorsen, K. (1998). Symbolic purposes and factual consequences of the concepts “self-reliance” and “dependency” in contemporary discourses on welfare. *Scandinavian Journal of Social Welfare*, 7(1), 56–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.1998.tb00275.x>
- Integreringsloven. (2020). Lov om integrering gjennom opplæring, utdanning og arbeid (LOV-2020-11-06-127). Lovdata. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2020-11-06-127>
- Introduksjonsloven. (2003). *Lov om introduksjonsordning og norskopplæring for nyankomne innvandrere* (LOV-2003-07-04-80). Lovdata. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLO/lov/2003-07-04-80>
- Jessop, B. (1994). *The transition to post-Fordism and the Schumpeterian workfare state* (pp. 13–37). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359846_chapter_2
- Justis-og beredskapsdepartementet. (2016). *Rundskriv til introduksjonsloven*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/g012016/id2511944/>
- Kavli, H. C. (2020). *Kontinuitet og endring Familiepraksis og kvinners yrkesdeltakelse blant innvandrere i Norge* (2020:08). Fafo. https://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2020/20743_1.pdf
- Kobberstad, J. H. (2020). Høyt utdanna flyktningers tilnærminger til kvalifisering og arbeid |. *Søkelys På Arbeidslivet*, 37(1–2), 92–108. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-7989-2020-01-02-06>

- Koopmans, R. (2016). Does assimilation work? Sociocultural determinants of labour market participation of European Muslims. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(2), 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1082903>
- Lee, J. A. B. (2001). *The Empowerment Approach to Social Work Practice* (2nd ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Lillevik, R. & Tyldum, G. (2018). *En mulighet for kvalifisering Brukerundersøkelse blant deltakere i introduksjonsprogrammet*. Fafo.
<https://www.imdi.no/contentassets/f72d0361d57e4476b6c8bb023e1cf6b4/en-mulighet-for-kvalifisering>
- McDonald, C. & Marston, G. (2005). Workfare as welfare: Governing unemployment in the advanced liberal state. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(3), 374–401.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018305054077>
- Meld. St. 30 (2015–2016). Fra mottak til arbeidsliv – en effektiv integreringspolitikk. Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet.
<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-30-20152016/id2499847/>
- Nadim, M. (2014). Reinterpreting the Relation between Motherhood and Paid Work: Second-Generation Immigrant Women in Norway. *The Sociological Review*, 62(3), 494–511. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12176>
- Ng, R. & Shan, H. (2012). Lifelong learning as ideological practice: An analysis from the perspective of immigrant women in Canada. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 29(2), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601371003616574>.
- Olsen, B. & Askvik, T. (2021). *Flyktninger i og utenfor arbeidsmarkedet 2019* (No. 2021/5). SSB. <https://www.ssb.no/arbeid-og-lonn/artikler-og-publikasjoner/flyktninger-i-og-utenfor-arbeidsmarkedet-2019>
- Orupabo, J. (2008). I andre land betyr ikke hudfarge noe, har du papirer, så får du en jobb. *Søkelys på arbeidslivet*, 25(1), 51–62.
- Røe, M. (2011). Why don't they want us?' Refugees still unemployed after many years in Norway. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 1(2), 109–123.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2011.601135>
- Roggeband, C. & Verloo, M. (2007). Dutch Women are Liberated, Migrant Women are a Problem: The Evolution of Policy Frames on Gender and Migration in the Netherlands, 1995–2005. *Social Policy & Administration*, 41(3), 271–288.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2007.00552.x>

- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511488856>
- Ruiz, I. & Vargas-Silva, C. (2018). Differences in labour market outcomes between natives, refugees and other migrants in the UK. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 18(4), 855–885. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lby027>
- Schans, D. & Optekamp, C. (2016). *Raising awareness, changing behavior? Combatting irregular migration through information campaigns*. Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. SAGE.
- Spehar, A. (2021). Navigating institutions for integration: Perceived institutional barriers of access to the labour market among refugee women in Sweden. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(4), 3907-3925. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa140>
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>
- Watkins, J. (2017). Australia’s irregular migration information campaigns: Border externalization, spatial imaginaries, and extraterritorial subjugation. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 5(3), 282–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2017.1284692>
- Willmann Robleda, Zubia (2020) Re-Inventing Everyday Life in the Asylum Centre. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 10 (2), 82-95. <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.251>