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The importance of relationships in the encounter between NAV staff and young, vulnerable users. An action research study

Relasjonen si betyding i møtet mellom Nav-tilsette og unge sårbare brukarar. Ein aksjonsforskingsstudie

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ABSTRACT

Vulnerable young people not engaged in work, education or training constitute a user group regarded with increasing concern in Europe. Set in a Norwegian context, this article investigates what the users themselves considered to be the most important help towards employment. The article is based on an action research approach and comprises data from a variety of sources, such as research circle method. A key finding is that relationships are the most crucial factor for the users. Long-term contact and persistent and inquisitive helpers are especially important. The meaningful relationship is not limited to the one with the professional helpers; it also includes the relationship between the users. Based on an action-oriented research approach, the article calls for more research that listens to the users' voices.

SAMANDRAG

Sårbar ungdom utanfor arbeid, utdanning eller aktivitet er ei brukargruppe som blir sett på med aukande uro i Europa. Artikkelen undersøkjer i ein norsk kontekst kva brukarar sjølve erfarer som den viktigaste hjelpa på vegen mot aktivitet. Artikkelen byggjer på ei aksjonsforskingsstudie, og omfattar data frå ulike kjelder, mellom anna forskingssirkel. Eit sentralt funn er at relasjonen er mest avgjerande for brukarane. Særleg viktig er langvarig kontakt, uthaldande og utforskande hjelparar. Den betydingsfulle relasjonen er ikkje avgrensa til relasjonen med dei profesjonelle hjelparane, men inkluderer òg relasjonen mellom brukarane. Med utgangspunkt i aksjonsforskingstilnærminga, etterlyser artikkelen meir forsking som lyttar til brukarane sine stemmer.

Introduction

The article focuses on the group of vulnerable, young users of services in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) who are not engaged in work, education or training. This is a diverse group with complex problems, such as no housing, poverty, low levels of education, little work experience, mental and addiction-related problems, learning difficulties and behaviour problems. Many of them have grown up in poor families that are long-standing recipients of

various welfare benefits (Frøyland, 2017). Young adults who are not in education, work or training represent a growing social challenge in Europe (Mawn et al., 2017; Sveinsdottir et al., 2018).

In Europe, activising these users and providing them with labour market programmes has been increasingly emphasised since the early 1990s (Djupvik & Eikås, 2016). The goal has been to prevent poverty and social exclusion and enable these young people to support themselves through paid work (Hansen, 2018; Lødemel & Moreira, 2014). In parallel, the users have been charged with more personal responsibility and the requirement for activation and participation has escalated (Wright, 2012; Lundberg, 2018).

Relationships and relationship building are some of the most frequently used concepts in literature and practice related to social work. The concept of the 'social worker relationship' has been consistently emphasised for more than a century (O'Leary et al., 2013). Through studies in which the clients themselves describe their own experiences of relationships, we can obtain knowledge of how they regard themselves, their identity and their relationships to others (Ylvisaker, 2013). According to Bruhn and Källström (2018), there is nevertheless a dearth of literature that identifies exactly *what* the characteristics of good relationship building are.

NAV constitutes a complex context in which numerous factors impinge on interaction. This article is confined to vulnerable young users and what they see as important in finding employment, education options or training. It explores the experiences that these users have had in their encounters with both NAV staff and other users. The objective of the article is to get a deeper understanding of *how* relational experiences may help these users in the process leading to employment, education or training, and specifically *which* qualities of these relationships they perceive as helpful. The article is based on a long-term research project under the auspices of Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL).

Building relationships

Since vulnerable young people on the threshold to adult life often have complex problems, they need help from different parts of the public support system (Frøyland, 2019; Munford & Sanders, 2015; Sveinsdottir et al., 2018). Numerous studies have found that young people who are at risk of falling outside the labour market often lack networks or stable relationships (Sanders & Munford, 2014; Ramsdal et al., 2018). According to Sveinsdottir et al. (2018), relational problems present the greatest challenge for this group of young people.

Key qualities of the help include an ability on the part of the professionals to build relationships and trust, and to provide individual follow-up and continuity (Freake et al., 2007; Frøyland, 2017, 2019; Hansen & Natland, 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2012; Kane et al., 2017; Munford & Sanders, 2015; Muurinen, 2019; Solheim, 2010).

Both Norwegian and international studies (Freake et al., 2007; Frøyland, 2017) show that the young people themselves underscore that the helpers should provide advice and guidance, listen and understand, and be caring, reliable, experienced, qualified and easy to talk to. They would like the helpers to enter into what they refer to as normal relationships, similar to the roles of friends, parents and caregivers (Frøyland, 2017). This can be related to the fact that users often provide narratives of having very personal relationships with their social worker (O'Leary et al., 2013) and that these relationships often have qualities that are reminiscent of friendships (Doel, 2010). In the study of work-related benefits in NAV, Lundberg (2012) claims that interpersonal relationships and the encounter with the users are the very litmus test for the agency.

In a Norwegian-Swedish study, the clients describe as especially useful those encounters in which they feel recognition for some aspects of their life situation that frequently go unrecognised in other arenas (Ylvisaker, 2013). In a study from North America, Tilson and Simonsen (2013) show how successful work-related support for vulnerable young people is characterised by a genuine confidence in these young people's abilities, an awareness of their life context and an ability to communicate with them and their families. A Danish study also describes the social workers' ability to build users' self-efficacy as crucial for their success in returning to work (Danneris & Dall, 2017).

User meetings in NAV

Few Norwegian studies have focused on interaction and collaboration in service user meetings in NAV and on the opportunities and challenges this communication setting presents (Riis-Johansen et al., 2018). Through detailed linguistic analyses of interaction in NAV, Riis-Johansen et al. have investigated what they refer to as the dynamics of service user meetings, with a special focus on the NAV advisors' management of the interactions and how these facilitate user participation. The clearest finding in their study was the complexity of the interaction, which reflects the diversity of the user group. The meetings tended to be unstructured, and the framework, topics and goals often appeared to be rather vague. The complexity requires the advisors to possess a broad repertoire of communicative strategies and instruments (Riis-Johansen et al., 2018). A Danish study of encounters between social workers and users similarly calls for the development of communication skills that involve exploration, empathy and recognition on the part of the social workers (Andersen, 2019).

None of the studies referred to above specifically focus on young, vulnerable users who are not in regular employment. Little research on service user meetings in particular (Riis-Johansen et al., 2018) and difficulties involved in reaching this group (Ose & Jensen, 2017; Sveinsdottir et al., 2018) apparently lead to a dearth of knowledge about the experiences and wishes of vulnerable young users in their encounter with NAV.

Shame and recognition

Experiences of shame and recognition are closely associated with relationship building and the users' encounter with NAV. Shame can be portrayed in a relational perspective, as a phenomenon created and perceived in social relationships (Frønes, 2001). In this understanding, shame is divided into *classical*, *modern and situationally dependent* forms. People inflict classical shame on themselves and their family when they violate norms and rules of behaviour. Modern or individualised shame takes the form of self-contempt over failure to achieve personal goals or to become the person you want to be. Situationally dependent shame is associated with being offended and the perception of being rendered invisible by others. Numerous Scandinavian studies show that recipients of social benefits feel ashamed to receive such help (Angelin, 2009; Natland & Celik, 2015; Solheim, 2010). Consequently, shame can erode an individual's agency and their ability to take care of themselves (Gjersøe, 2016; Natland & Celik, 2015).

One theory of recognition widely used in social work distinguishes between three forms of social recognition: love, respect and social esteem (Honneth, 2008). Love means to recognise others as valuable in themselves, leading to the development of self-confidence. Respect means to value the autonomy of the other, leading to the development of self-respect. Social esteem involves recognising the personal qualities and achievements of the other and leads to the development of self-esteem. According to Honneth, our personal identity has an intersubjective structure, in which recognition lays the foundation for the development of a positive identity. Høilund and Juul (2015) claim that this understanding of recognition is a key approach in the encounter with users. Recognition in social work can also be regarded as a relational concept that encompasses both the dissimilarity *and* the equality between the user and the social worker (Aamodt, 2014).

Method

Research design

The study is based on action research, as a form of intervention-oriented research, where the researchers intervene in the phenomenon they are studying (Bukve, 2016; Slettebø & Seim, 2016). This approach aims to achieve both knowledge development and change (action), particularly in the field of practice and among users and educational institutions (Malterud, 2017; Slettebø & Seim, 2016).

The research circle, as a specific approach within action research, is the key data collection method in this study. The method facilitates participation by practitioners, users and researchers, enabling them to share both experiential and academic knowledge (Slettebø & Seim, 2016). The method was chosen because of its emphasis on collective knowledge development and continuous dialogue. All participants were engaged in exploration, descriptions and the early analysis, while the researchers had the responsibility for ensuring the scientific dimension. The overall theme for the research circle was chosen by the participating NAV Office: 'How to help vulnerable young users towards employment, education or training'. In addition, the design included a focus group study.

Sample

The county administration in NAV selected the aim of the study and the office to participate. The selected NAV office and the researchers discussed the composition of participants. NAV office staff volunteered to participate. In light of the existing collaboration and the wish to continue this, the NAV office suggested that external employers and the head of the volunteer centre should participate. The inclusion criteria for user participants were that they should be young and have comprehensive problems, not engaged in work or education and/or labour market programmes, and long-standing contact with NAV.

The participants included (1) four users: three men and one woman, aged 21–28; (2) three NAV employees: one male executive with a degree in social work, one female advisor with a degree in social work, and a male team leader with craft skills and responsibility for a vocational training programme; (3) two employers from industry: one man and one woman, and the female head of the local volunteer centre; and (4) two female researchers from HVL (the first and second authors). One external researcher/supervisor participated in three sessions and one meeting.

All of the users had received services from different parts of the public support system. The male users had been/were in a municipal vocational training programme (the work group) headed by the team leader. The advisor and team leader from NAV were following up the users in parallel with the research circle.

Costs were covered by the County Governor in the county involved and by HVL. The users received a NOK 250 gift voucher for each session they attended.

Data development

The data material draws on two sources: (1) audio recordings and minutes from the research circle, taken by the first and second authors and approved by other participants, and (2) audio recordings and transcriptions from the focus group interviews, prepared by the first and second authors. The topics discussed in the focus group interviews included the structure and form of work in the study, the content of the meetings, whether participation in the research circle had helped produce any change for the user participants and/or staff, and whether the research circle had generated any new knowledge about the road towards employment.

Research circle
The research circle extended over 14 months, encompassing 12 half-day sessions and 3 full-day seminars that included both formal and informal interaction. At the opening seminar, the participants themselves decided the following subthemes for continuing discussion, such as *from passivity to activity*, *social inclusion and skills*, *services at NAV*. All sessions started with joint reflections, experience sharing and questioning, including questions and comments directed at the users from the NAV staff on behalf of NAV employees outside the research circle.

At the mid-way seminar, participants discussed the usefulness of the knowledge that had been generated so far. The discussions served as input to a new qualification programme for users between the ages of 18 and 30. The work was summarised at the third and closing seminar and

plans for further dissemination were made. The users participated in lectures for students at the bachelor programme in social work, in two regional NAV conferences, at a national conference on user participation in research and a session for users held by NAV. The sharing of experience through sessions, seminars, lectures and conferences, elucidates the knowledge production and the change (action) that characterise the action research approach.

The study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. Names and personally identifiable information are anonymised. The users themselves volunteered to participate in the dissemination work.

Methodology discussion

The awareness of the researcher's role in the construction of knowledge, required at all stages in a research process, is of pivotal importance to action research. Facilitation represents a challenge in such projects, since the researchers have a dual role as both researchers and participants. The external supervisor from HVL therefore served as an important discussion partner along the way. The action-research approach presumed that the researchers served as active moderators of the sessions, and there was extensive interaction between the researchers and the other participants. Since the users were facing complex and long-term challenges, exploring these was important for us as moderators, as we had a particular responsibility for recognising and providing room for the users' voices and experiences. The first and second authors felt that their background as clinical social workers and their extensive practical experience, including as advisors to professionals and students, were useful in the research circle. The users felt treated as equals, a key value in research circles. As researchers in a project with user participation, we nevertheless need to be aware of the asymmetry between the different participants' roles (Malterud, 2017).

At the first session, all participants expressed uncertainty regarding the content and meaning of the research circle. The NAV staff were especially uncertain about the degree to which the users would participate and whether they would be honest about their experiences. The continuous exploration of the participants' experiences and voices, as described above, was essential to ensure the internal validity of the study.

The sample of users was relatively small. Since NAV staff who knew them had recruited the users, this may have given rise to favouritism, i.e. selection of those whom it would be easy to work with (Thorèn, 2005). External motivation, such as the promise of food and gift vouchers, may also have spurred the users to accept the invitation to participate. The users explained, however, that their trust in the participating NAV staff was what made them agree to participate, and they underscored that they had encouraged each other to participate. The importance of personal familiarity with other participants is also evident in similar research collaborations with users (Muurinen, 2019).

The study's external validity has been assessed through presentations and discussions with other researchers and comparisons with findings in other relevant studies and theories (Malterud, 2017). Feedback confirming that the findings were easily recognisable in the field of practice and by researchers supported the validity and relevance of the study. The users' contributions in the lectures indicate that this knowledge is relevant for the qualification of professionals.

Methods of analysis

Based on the joint analysis conducted in the research circle, we undertook a thematic analysis of the entire data material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis had an inductive approach, where some of the themes originated from the joint analysis in the research circle, while others gradually emerged throughout the coding process. Especially themes related to the importance of relations, early emerged as central.

After the initial coding of the transcripts and minutes, the first and second authors identified potential themes from the data material, and grouped the different codes we considered relevant

for understanding the diverse and nuanced relationships into these themes. These preliminary themes were used as an analytical framework when the first and second authors analysed the entire data material. The transcripts were read numerous times, in order to ensure immersion, and in the ongoing analysis the themes were synthesised, reorganised and reviewed to refine the specifics of each theme. In the final phase of the analysis all authors participated, selecting extract examples and quotations from the material to illustrate themes and analytical points. Even though the analysis was inductive, and as such data-driven, we are theoretically informed by our background from health and social science research. Especially in the final analysis, theory and literature was used to discuss and shed light on the analysis. In this sense, the analysis has a partly abductive approach.

The analysis brought forth the following four topics, which will be described in the section on findings. *The importance of the advisors*, *The importance of the team leader*, *The importance of the other users* and *The users' perceptions of themselves*: *between shame, confidence and coping*.

Findings – the meaningful relationships

The findings in this study are associated with the relationship as seen from the users' perspective and include their narratives about experiences of encounters with both current and former NAV employees. The findings also include experiences that emerged in the dialogue in the research circle.

According to the participants, the work and process in the research circle was characterised by mutuality, respect and a fruitful exploration of each other's experiences and opinions. The users took an active role from the very first session and throughout the entire process, both in the choice of topics and the ensuing discussions. The users appeared in agreement during the discussions, something which might be a result of the continuing exploration. Exploration was a key element of the research circle, and the exploration of the users' relational experiences over time made a strong impression and gave rise to new insight into their problems and resources, for both users and the NAV staff. The research circle appeared to provide the staff with different information about the users than they usually obtained in meetings.

Irrespective of the topic under discussion, the clearest finding was that the users tended to emphasise relational experiences. When the users' experiences of and wishes for the content of the relationships were detailed, important nuances and variations in the different relationships came to light.

The importance of the advisors

When the users referred to their relationship with the advisors in the NAV office, they were concerned with what happened both before as well as during the meeting itself. The users had little prior knowledge of what kind of help they could expect from NAV. They were frequently told to have a look at the website, which was experienced as difficult, and often caused the users to postpone their contact with NAV. This felt as exacerbating their difficult life situation, and the users called for face-to-face interaction with the advisor: 'The web gives me no comfort, but my advisor does'.

Many users recounted experiences from previous meetings with NAV advisors where they had been rejected. A common experience was that even after numerous meetings with an advisor they could still be uncertain about the framework and content of the meetings. Some meetings were described as interrogations that involved numerous formal documents. Moreover, they recounted how they previously had acted strategically in order not to lose any benefits: 'had to be careful about what I said, could not say that I was taking drugs, I was afraid of losing my entitlements'.

At an early stage, some of the users described themselves as generally 'lazy' and that they needed to 'get a grip on themselves'. Despite their many years of contact with the public support system, they had difficulties understanding and articulating their own problems. The users said that they were reticent and taciturn, especially in meetings where they felt insecure. In such situations, the users wanted the advisors to show more initiative, be active and provide specific feedback on what the users were

saying or doing. Many users perceived the office environment as alienating and preferred the meetings to take place in other settings. The users described how they were unaccustomed to speak about their difficulties, both in private relationships and to the advisor. They believed that speaking about difficulties would enlarge them. Even in cases where the users had started to trust their advisor and had decided to reveal their problems, the threshold remained high: 'Going in there and having to talk about everything feels like fighting a hundred lions, being that afraid wears you down'.

The users expressed that they had gradually come to perceive the contact with the present employees as helpful, and based this view on their impression that the staff members were genuinely concerned about them as individuals. They also experienced this in the research circle. The users wanted the staff to *care*, described as greeting, recognising, taking contact, smiling a little, showing interest, answering questions, providing specific feedback, helping to understand things, investigating, reminding, being flexible and persevering. Showing such signs of care were significant in the relational building processes, and could also establish turning points for the users: 'I was sick and tired of all the problems and all the stupid situations that I caused for myself – I started opening up to her, I've never opened up to anyone before'. Such openness, first vis-à-vis the advisor and later in the research circle, caused a change in self-esteem: they no longer felt as powerless: 'Previously I met some NAV drone who decided what would happen in my life. I didn't really have much to say. But now I do. Now I know that I need to make an effort and do something'.

The importance of the team leader

The nuances in the relationships between the users and employees became clearer as the dialogue in the research circle progressed. When the users referred to their relationship with the team leader, they emphasised its close and long-term nature. They contrasted this with the monthly meetings with the former advisors in the NAV office. The users expressed clearly that their problems were so overwhelming and unmanageable that they were incapable of making any changes by themselves. They described how the team leader's accessibility, ability and willingness to provide individual and flexible follow-up was crucial to their change.

When the users failed to show up for the work group, the team leader came to their homes, knocked on the windows if they did not open the door, tried to elicit a response and did not give up: 'The team leader continued nagging and nagging and sending me text messages. At first I found this really irritating, but then I started to think about it'. The irritation seemed to subside when the user realised that the team leader cared. Just as in the case with the advisors, signs of care were important in building the relationships; the users experience of being important to somebody else, made it more difficult not to show up: 'You could hear the disappointment in his voice. I got a guilty conscience, don't like to disappoint him. It means everything to have this person who knows you'. The users highlighted that it was easy to understand what the team leader was talking about, since the conversations were associated with specific events, and the team leader showed his own reactions clearly.

There was a distinct gap between the advisors and the team leaders' perception of their own importance and the users' emphasis on these relations. The users' explicit recognition of the NAV staff's importance came as a surprise to the professionals and was a very emotional moment for them.

The importance of other users

Not only the relationships with the advisors and the team leader were described as important, but also the one with the other participants. Parallel to the persistence shown by the advisor and the team leader, it was also important that the other users did not give up on them. The transition from passivity to participation in the work group provided for new experiences: 'I had been at home, not doing a damn thing for 4–5 months. Just undertaking something helped me out of the isolation. I didn't notice how little fun my life was until I got out of the house'. The users remarked

that they would be embarrassed in front of the others if they failed to get out of bed or stay at work for more than an hour.

The users had undertaken several work placements at regular workplaces. NAV raised the question of whether the work group's vocational training could also be undertaken at a regular workplace. The users rejected the idea, referring to a shared experience of uncertainty and anxiety in most relationships and their lack of familiarity with regular workplaces and their social codes. The users described their previous work placements as frightening, where the key issue had been to persevere, but without coping: 'After I left the NN workplace I have actually been able to breathe again'. The users felt that the help that was provided in their relationships with the team leader and the other users in the work group could not simply be replaced by ordinary employment.

During the research circle, the NAV office tested out various measures, for example having a user from the research circle tell other NAV users about his experiences and how he had utilised the help from NAV. Having someone that the other users could identify with was considered immensely beneficial by the NAV staff and the users themselves. NAV users from outside the research circle were subsequently invited to participate in this initiative, and this created recognition and an opportunity for change.

The users' perceptions of themselves

Although the users already trusted the advisor and the team leader, the research circle sessions helped the users admit their problems and be more open about them. The scope and severity of the users' problems were more comprehensive than what they themselves or the NAV staff had realised. In the same way, the users' resources became known – resources that previously had not been sufficiently visible or sufficiently acknowledged in the relationships. The users explained this change in light of their experience of having their opinions listened to in the research circle. According to the users, this occurred because the other participants listened to their experiences and wishes, took them seriously and explored them. Being heard also meant that their experiences could be used to benefit others.

At the early stage of the research circle, feelings of shame marked the users. The experience of coping and of developing confidence in their own resources gradually reduced the shame of being a NAV user: 'I'm no longer ashamed of being in NAV, but I was before'.

Discussion

The research circle highlighted and generated change for both users and staff, and in the following, we will discuss some of these processes of change across the findings that concern relationships. The grouping of the findings serves analytical purposes, and the four processes described did not unfold in isolation, but must be viewed in conjunction with each other and as deeply intertwined.

To acknowledge and recognise

According to the users, recognition over time was the key to helping them in the process leading to employment, education or training. We have described how the users underwent a process that helped bring their difficulties and resources to light, to both themselves and others. The users' experience of being seen and heard can be interpreted in light of Honneth's (2008) theory of recognition and the concepts 'invisible'–'visible', where the users' experiences changed from being invisible, i.e. socially neglected, to being visible. Social visibility is closely associated with recognition, and being visible and recognised are prerequisites for being able to acknowledge one's own situation (Honneth, 2008). In this way, the research circle generated dynamic processes: the users felt recognised, and this recognition gave rise to new acknowledgement of their own situation (Aamodt, 2014; Honneth, 2008).

The users' experience of being listened to and taken seriously can be interpreted in light of Honneth's third form of recognition: the users felt that they were valuable to the community. Their user experiences were used as resources even outside the research circle, and their contribution was thus valued both inside the group and outside. This gave rise to a mutuality between the users and society as a whole (Honneth, 2008; Ylvisaker, 2013), rendering visible the equality in these relationships (Aamodt, 2014).

To no longer be ashamed

In addition to new insight into their own problems and resources, this recognition reduced the users' sense of shame. Similar to what has been found in previous Scandinavian studies, the users in the research circle also had complex feelings of guilt and shame about receiving social welfare benefits and having to get help (Angelin, 2009; Natland & Celik, 2015; Solheim, 2010). This feeling of shame became an obstacle that affected their everyday life and gradually eroded their agency, and thereby their ability to be more independent and care for themselves (cf. Gjersøe, 2016; Natland & Celik, 2015). The users' descriptions of shame can be interpreted as a loss of status and equal standing, which according to Honneth (2008) and Høilund and Juul (2015) can be destructive for the perception of identity.

The feeling of shame over being a NAV user subsided as the research circle progressed. Solheim (2010) found a similar pattern in a study of relationships between clients and advisors in a social security office, where helpful encounters reduced the perception of shame. These positive encounters helped highlight and recognise the clients' own experiences. In a study of users who use narratives to help change their lives, Natland and Celik (2015) note how the users' reframing of themselves as active and empowered caused a transition from shame to pride. The users in our study experienced increased self-efficacy, and they reduced their feeling of not only situationally dependent shame, but also classic and individualised/modern shame as described by Frønes (2001).

Nuances in the relationships

As the research circle progressed, it became clear that the different relationships were crucial for the users to start their process of change. Being recognised involved being seen, but also entailed specific actions of assistance. In addition, the relationship with the other users was particularly important for making them feel like part of a community.

The users' emphasis on the importance of having advisors who *cared* is echoed in findings from a number of previous studies (Freake et al., 2007; Frøyland, 2017, 2019; Hutchinson et al., 2012; Kane et al., 2017; Muurinen, 2019; Sanders & Munford, 2014; Solheim, 2010). According to Hutchinson et al. (2012), a relationship of trust between a client and a social worker stems from having confidence in the client, being open to real involvement, being accessible and persevering. The users in the research circle confirmed this: even though they might be ambivalent about needing help, they felt that having NAV advisors that were committed and did not give up was crucial for successful change. For the users, this confirmed that they were valued.

This emerged with particular clarity in their relationship with the team leader. The users highlighted the concrete nature of the collaboration with the team leader, which led to both a more unrestrained form of communication as well as a sense of coherence between the job tasks, their own ability to cope and future employment. In this way, the users' identity development was linked to activities and the experience of coping. This enabled them to value themselves. This also concurs with the study by Hutchinson et al. (2012); the relationship was strengthened by interaction in everyday arenas. In Honneth's terms, this can be understood as saying that when recognition is viewed as intersubjective, relational forms, it provides the basis for positive identity development (Honneth, 2008; Høilund & Juul, 2015).

The users also highlighted the importance of participating in informal and 'ordinary' interaction with the team leader, in the form of small talk or cigarette breaks. In line with previous studies (Doel, 2010; Frøyland, 2017; O'Leary et al., 2013), this can be seen as reflecting a wish for the helpers to enter into 'ordinary relationships'. Their experience of the relationship with the team leader reinforced the users' perception of themselves as 'ordinary', thus raising them towards the level of 'normal'.

The contact with the other users was perceived as valuable, because it involved a sense of not being an outsider, of equality and not being different or worthless – i.e. social recognition (Honneth, 2008). The users often had no networks or stable relationships, and their peers could compensate for these to some extent.

Exploration as a tool

Both the users and the NAV staff saw it as valuable that in the conversations in the research circle their exploration went further and deeper than they were used to. In most cases, the users would respond to this exploration, but sometimes they went quiet or refused to answer. They gradually explained this by stating that their experiences were tacit or that this way of thinking was new to them. The exploration was an extended process and involved articulation, concretisation, reformulation, identification of obstacles and resources and drawing parallels. A precondition for this exploration was that it needed to be undertaken with empathy and that connections were made between the exploration in the research circle and the challenges the users were facing in everyday situations.

The users perceived this exploration as an expression of openness and genuine interest. The exploration helped highlight the users and their life situation – its complexity, but also the resources. Similar findings of how the users' experiences can potentially be of major importance can be found in Gjersøe's (2016) field study of NAV advisors and their appraisals of applicants for work assessment allowance. Exploration requires the advisors to possess and use professional discretion in the form of taking the initiative, leading the process, having a repertoire of communication strategies, having the ability to handle rejection, remaining sensitive, confident and perseverant (Frøyland, 2017). The fact that the advisors in our study reported using exploration and relationship building as instruments may explain why their meetings do not concur with the findings of Riis-Johansen et al. (2018), namely that NAV meetings tended to be vague and not very structured. However, the framework of the research circle may have reinforced both the degree and intensity of the exploration.

Conclusion

The main finding in this study is that the relationship is the key factor at stake in the efforts to help vulnerable young users find employment, education or training. Developing a good relationship with the users is challenging for the advisors, but crucial for them to succeed. The users placed special emphasis on the time perspective – building a relationship requires the advisors to treat the users with respect, explore their situation and persevere.

Furthermore, the importance of relationships is not limited to the one between users and advisors, or users and team leaders, but also the relationship between the users themselves. Through contact with their peers, the users experienced social recognition and a sense of equality. These relationships are often overlooked, both in the field of practice and in research on activation and inclusion.

This article is based on the users' experiences and wishes. In order to generate more information about the road to employment, education and training for a vulnerable group of young people, both researchers and professionals need to take these experiences seriously and listen to the users' voices.

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Disclosure statement

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

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