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The meaning of professionalism in activation work: frontline managers' perspectives

Førstelinjelederes etterspørsel etter profesjonalisme i aktiveringsarbeid

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ABSTRACT

The issue of professionalism in activation work is at the forefront of scholarly discussions. Due to the importance ascribed to the organisational setting of professional work, it is crucial to investigate if professionalism is requested by organisations and what professionalism means from the perspective of managers acting on their behalf. This article focuses on frontline managers: those who recruit activation workers and are in a position to make judgements about what competencies and qualities are needed. Using interviews with frontline managers and job advertisements for frontline positions in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), we investigate whether frontline managers look for professionalism in activation work and, if so, what perceptions of professionalism they hold and what kinds of responsibilities they expect frontline workers to assume.

The analysis demonstrates that, in the perception of managers, activation work requires both (1) professional knowledge, skills and capabilities to make discretionary judgements; and (2) responsibility to the professional self, the quality of the work and the social contract of the work as mediated through the mission of the organisation. Ultimately, professional responsibility involves balancing clients' needs with responsibilities and balancing conflicting values in activation work.

SAMMENDRAG

Hvorvidt det forventes eller kreves profesjonalisme i aktiveringsarbeid er et sentralt forskningsspørsmål. Organisasjonene der de profesjonelle jobber, legger betingelser for profesjonell praksis. Fordi ledere opererer på organisasjonens vegne, er det interessant å studere hvorvidt ledere etterspør profesjonalisme og i så fall hva slags profesjonalisme de ønsker hos sine medarbeider. Denne artikkelen bruker intervjuer med førstelinjeledere og stillingsannonser for arbeid i førstelinjen i Arbeids- og Velferdsforvaltningen (NAV) for å undersøke forståelser av profesjonalisme hos lederne som rekrutterer medarbeidere til aktiveringsarbeid. Analysen viser at førstelinjeledere forstår aktiveringsarbeid som arbeid som krever profesjonalisme, i form av profesjonell kunnskap, ferdigheter og evne til å utøve skjønn, og

KEYWORDS

Professionalism; organisations; activation; public services; social work; professional responsibility

NØKKEORD

profesjonalisme; aktivering; førstelinjeledere; organisasjon; Arbeids- og velferdsforvaltningen; NAV; sosialt arbeid

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profesjonelt ansvar i forhold til eget arbeid og den sosiale kontrakten arbeidet er omsluttet av, mediert gjennom den organisasjonen de er ansatt i. Profesjonalisme, slik lederne forstår det, innebærer også å avveie ulike og dels motstridende verdier.

Introduction

Active labour market policies aimed at increasing the employment of jobless groups have been the object of political attention in Europe and abroad (Bonoli, 2010; Brodtkin & Marston, 2013; van Berkel et al., 2017). As the target groups of these policies have broadened, the policies have given rise to new frontline occupations, forms of activation work and services promoting the labour-market (re)integration of marginalised citizens (van Berkel et al., 2017). Therefore, the issue of professionalism in frontline activation work has come to the forefront of scholarly discussions (Caswell & Larsen, 2017; Gjerstøe, 2016; Lindqvist & Lundälv, 2018; Nothdurfter, 2016; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2019; Sainsbury, 2008; van Berkel et al., 2010; van der Aa & van Berkel, 2015). The question has been raised as to whether activation work should be seen as professional work or as mere policy programme administration with a rule-oriented administrative function (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012).

Current debates about frontline activation work are outlined by van Berkel and Knies (2016). One debate concerns how clients are served at the frontlines and how frontline activation workers use their discretionary space (Brodtkin & Marston, 2013; Evans, 2011; Zacka, 2017). Furthermore, considerations about the role of the street-level worker as a state agent ('policy implementer') versus a citizen agent (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000) point to the activation worker's dilemma in deciding 'who to serve' in activation (the government, the organisation and/or the client). Finally, the management of frontline work and the room available for professionalism have been debated, linking these issues to a broader debate about the pressure placed on professionals (Evetts, 2003, 2011; Freidson, 2001; Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2014). With this article, we primarily address the latter strand of debate. Here, bureaucratic organisations and managerial control often appear as adversarial to professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007, 2016; Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2014).

Due to the importance ascribed to the organisational setting of professional work, it is essential to examine if professionalism is desired by organisations along with what professionalism means from the perspective of the managers acting on behalf of the organisations. This article focuses on frontline managers: those who recruit activation workers and are in a position to make judgements about what competencies and qualities are needed. From interviews with frontline managers and job advertisements for frontline positions in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), we investigate whether the managers' requests indicate a desire for professionalism in activation work and, if so, what perceptions of professionalism frontline managers hold and what kinds of responsibilities they expect frontline workers to assume. Our analysis demonstrates that the competence desired by the managers' aligned with key aspects of professionalism, and reflected a professionalism within which professional responsibility meant active engagement with the organisational context of professional work.

Theoretical perspectives

Understandings of professionalism

Professionalism is often associated with the specific characteristics of professions and other expert occupations (Evetts, 2011; Freidson, 2001; Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). These include expert knowledge; the autonomy to employ specialised knowledge in individual cases; and a normative service orientation and code of ethics. According to Freidson (2001), professionalism means greater commitment to doing good work than to economic gain, and to quality rather than efficiency. The idea of a

calling, or a moral imperative to sacrifice self-interest to protect and support the interests of others, is at the core of professionalism (Mitchell & Ream, 2014; Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2011).

According to Sullivan and Shulman (2005) professionalism includes three elements: (1) a theoretical, academic knowledge base and analytical reasoning, argument and research; (2) the skills and abilities to make effective judgements in the face of uncertainty and to learn from such experiences; and (3) a professional culture with social roles and responsibilities. This third element involves integrity and a sense of direction. It also entails responsibility for the quality of one's own work and 'the capacity and disposition to perform in accordance with the best standards of a field in a way that serves the larger society' (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005, p. 30).

Hence, professionalism involves both the competence to perform the designated professional tasks (including a knowledge base, acquired through higher education, and skills acquired through practical experience), and the attitudes related to being and acting as a professional (such as ethics, integrity, commitment to quality, a service orientation and allegiance to the field's social contract). Following Solbrekke and Sugrue (2011), professional responsibility here is used as a term to designate the expectations for appropriate action, i.e. what it means to act in a professionally responsible manner (p. 11). Given these qualities of professionalism, professionals could and should be granted autonomy to make discretionary judgements in accordance with their competence as well as normative and professional standards.

Professionalism and organisations

Professionalism is, according to Freidson (2001), an ideal-type logic for organising and controlling work, distinct from both market and bureaucratic organisation. Professionalism entails that professionals follow a goal that may reach beyond the goals of those served (i.e. the employer or the clients). Professional control means autonomy, and neither the employer, the organisation nor the client can trump professional judgement. With professional control over work, trust and confidence should characterise the relations between the practitioner and the client; and the practitioner and the employer (Evetts, 2011).

The organisations in which professionals work are often described as subjecting them to externalised forms of control and delimiting their discretionary space. According to Evetts (2011), an increasing organisational dominance of professional work occurs through the standardisation of work procedures and the implementation of accountability measures, such as target-setting and performance reviews. Deprofessionalization, meaning a decline in professional control, discretion and autonomy, is perceived as resulting from managerial and bureaucratic control through rules and standards (van der Ween, 2014). It has been argued that socially responsible professionalism may be undermined by regulatory, fiscal, technological, political and emotional incentive systems (Mitchell & Ream, 2014). For instance, when professionals are employed in hierarchical organisations, their responsibility may be restricted to being loyal to the culture and other prescriptions of the workplace (Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2011). In short, bureaucratic, organisational and managerial control appear as adversarial to professionalism.

Others have outlined more complex relationships between professionalism and organisations. According to Noordegraaf (2015), organising is an important dimension of professional work. Organising involves collaboration at the level of individual case treatment as well as prioritising at the level of multiple cases. Furthermore, Noordegraaf (2016) emphasises that professionalism becomes increasingly 'connective' as professionals becomes linked to other professionals and to the outside world through, for example, interprofessional cooperation.

According to Noordegraaf (2007), in public services, hybrid images of professionalism as a reflexive practice will fare better than both professional control and organisational control in enabling professionals and managers to meaningfully align clients, costs and capacities in ways that take account of ethical, budgetary and service standards. Along similar lines, Solbrekke and Sugrue (2011) argue that professional responsibility means that appropriate attention be given to clients, employers, public/societal needs, and workplace conditions.

With respect to street-level organisations, Zacka (2017) underlines the multifaceted normative demands and partly conflicting values that must be dealt with by both professionals and organisations. According to Zacka, the values of efficiency (good management of limited resources), fairness (treating citizens equally and impartially), responsiveness (attentiveness to individual needs and circumstances) and respect (deferential and not demeaning approaches) must be balanced at the street-level of welfare services. It rests with the frontline workers to find sensible compromises between these conflicting values.

Nothdurfter (2016) argues that the history of social work reveals that this profession has always had to deal with ambiguities. In the professionalism of social work lies the potential for negotiating through difficulties rather than resolving tensions, conflicts and contradictions. What is needed is 'a notion of professionalism that engages with policy ideas, organisational structures and practices that determine the rights and obligations of social citizenship' (Nothdurfter, 2016, p. 426). Thus, according to Nothdurfter, social work might serve as a referential model for 'activation work'.

Traditionally, professions have generally been seen as mediators between the state, the citizens and the public (Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2011). Sullivan and Shulman (2005) emphasise that responsibility is to a field of practice and that field's social contract. In contrast, Brint (2015) underscores the fundamental significance of organisations for absorbing society's claims on professionals and for shaping the contours of professional responsibilities. The position of organisations seems particularly relevant in Scandinavian and European welfare states in which the work of health and social care professionals takes place within public services, and the professionals are intimately linked to the organisations that employ them.

Given the perspective that organisational and managerial control undermine professionalism, one implication could be that organisations implementing activation policies might not regard activation work as requiring discretionary judgements, professional knowledge, skills, and responsibility. Instead, organisations might regard activation work as rule-oriented administration sufficiently guided by organisational standards and procedures. On the other hand, from more complex perspectives on the relations between professionalism and organisations, managers could be more interested in forms of professionalism that embrace ethical, budgetary and service standards while also incorporating multifaceted normative demands and conflicting values.

Implications for the study of activation work in Norway

Activation policies differ between countries (Bonoli, 2010; Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl, 2008). According to van Berkel and van der Aa (2012), they differ 'in terms of the diversity of programmes, the nature of rights and obligations of unemployed people and the nature of sanctions and the strictness of enforcing sanctions' (p. 496). Therefore, the tasks of activation workers also differ from country to country, and sometimes even within countries. Additionally, governance and management instruments and incentives also affect the behaviours of activation workers (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012).

The context of this study is the Norwegian active labour market policy (ALMP) which, similar to other Scandinavian countries, has close relation between social policy and employment policy. In Norway, this has become manifest in the organisational integration of benefit administration, employment services and social services in one frontline organisation. The ALMP became an integral part of Nordic welfare states in the 1960s and 1970s through extensive vocational training programmes (Armingeon, 2007; Bonoli, 2010). Investment in people's skills and employability by means of activation is a distinct feature of the ALMP.

Around 184,000 persons, or 5.5% of the Norwegian working-age population, are registered with an 'impaired work capacity' (NAV, 2019) and are therefore entitled to more extensive support than ordinary unemployed persons. To such groups with complex health conditions and/or multi-problem life situations, activation services need to be provided in conjunction with healthcare, social services and rehabilitation services (Heidenreich & Aurich-Beerheide, 2014). Hence, assumedly, activation work in Norway resembles professional work rather than mere rule-oriented programme administration and

thus the frontline organisations of the NAV would desire of their workers some form of professionalism.

On the other hand, several previous studies have reported that national authorities have governed frontline organisations through management instruments characterised by externalised forms of control; the standardisation of work procedures and practices; and the implementation of accountability measures such as target-setting and performance reviews (Jantz et al., 2015). These management instruments have challenged frontline managers (Breit et al., 2018; Fossetøl et al., 2015) as well as frontline workers (Gjersøe, 2016; Røhnebæk, 2012). Social workers in particular have been sceptical of what they have perceived to be rigidly standardised ways of approaching the clients (Røysum, 2013). Hence, if frontline managers adhere to such management instruments and rely on standardised procedures to guide frontline workers, then there may be no strong requests for professionalism in these frontline organisations.

Empirical materials, setting and analytical approach

This analysis is part of a larger project studying the interests in competent practitioners expressed by service-providing organisations in the healthcare and welfare sectors. Due to the rising importance given to activation in policy and public services, we wanted to undertake a specific analysis of the competencies expected by frontline organisations employing activation workers. Therefore, from the project's broader empirical material, we have selected 44 job advertisements for posts in the frontline organisations of the NAV (all job advertisements collected on a random day in November 2015) and six in-depth semi-structured interviews with frontline managers involved in the advertising and recruitment of new employees (undertaken in May and June of 2017).

Documents produced by employers, such as job advertisements or job descriptions, are considered valuable sources for exploring organisations' perceptions of the professionalism expected of their employees. Job advertisements have been used to track changes over time in the skills required of ideal employees and the values held by organisations (Harper, 2012; Jørgensen & Rutgers, 2014). Similarly, job descriptions have been used as sources for investigating manifestations of professionalism in task descriptions for social workers (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2011).

Using a snowball sampling method, managers with key roles in the recruitment of new employees were selected with the help of other managers. The ability to reflect on these processes was emphasised in order to achieve a purposeful sampling of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). The sample of managers was too small to be certain that all possible variations appeared in the interviews, but it still represented some variation in both the sizes and geographical locations of the frontline organisations. The detailed ways in which the interviewed managers spoke about recruitment and their evaluations of potential candidates demonstrated that they were actively involved in defining the competencies requested of new employees and saw themselves as influential in the selection of candidates. We therefore regard the managers as representatives of the frontline organisations as employers, and we see the advertisements and interviews as two supplemental sources to illuminate frontline managers' perspectives on the competencies and qualities desired in frontline workers.

The setting for this study was the frontline organisations of NAV that are tasked with assisting marginalised, jobless individuals regardless of whether they have access to National Insurance benefits or are dependent on social assistance for which Norwegian municipalities are responsible. The frontline organisations are organised as partnerships between the state administration and the municipalities. In 2017, 53% of the frontline workers were employed in municipalities (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019). Similarly, of the 44 job advertisements, 26 were for municipal posts.

The frontline workers represent a mix of educational backgrounds. Traditionally, social work education was prevalent in municipal social services. In 2015, social work was still the educational background of the largest group of employees (35%), followed by social sciences, including psychology and pedagogy (15%) and healthcare or education in other social services (9%), while 30% did not

have a higher education (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019). Three of the interviewed managers had a social work education.

'Counsellor' or 'advisor' was by far the most frequent job title in the advertisements (being included in 28 advertisements), with some including the term 'social worker'. Still the advertisements' job titles and the interviews revealed some specialised teams around specific target groups for which frontline organisations sought a 'refugee worker' or 'market contact'.

The data were approached via qualitative content analysis, a research method used for interpreting the manifest content of communication (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The systematic identifying of themes and patterns was carried out in a stepwise process. First, the themes in the job advertisements were related to the two aspects of professionalism identified in the literature: (1) academic knowledge/higher education and skills/experience, and (2) professional responsibility related to being or behaving as a professional. Then the themes from this initial analysis laid the groundwork for analysing the interviews.

The interviews complemented the advertisements and gave depth to the short advertisement texts. In fact, the same wording appeared in both the interviews and advertisements. One manager even used a copy of a recent advertisement to describe the kind of qualifications desired. The interviews showed that the requirements listed in the advertisements were prioritised when selecting candidates. They also provided insight into why certain qualifications were desired, and they allowed us to discern the managers' reflections on the role of these qualifications in relation to the work of the frontline organisation.

The terms 'profession' and 'professionalism' were seldom used in interviews and job advertisements. However, this does not necessarily mean that the frontline organisations were not interested in professional competencies. Rather, the language use aligned with common, everyday Norwegian in which professional words such as 'qualification', 'competence' and 'ability' are more frequently used in the daily context of the work. The meaning of professional responsibility emerged in the data through descriptions of challenging work situations related to the clients; the workers' own emotions and reactions; the organisational conditions of the work; and the competencies needed of workers to be able to handle such complex challenges and conditions.

The presentation of the analysis follows the distinction of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, pp. 213–216) between different interpretative contexts. The findings are first presented within the interpretive context of self-understanding, in which we as interpreters formulate what our data sources contained in condensed form. Thereafter, we apply our theoretical framework and discuss if the findings could be interpreted as perceptions of professionalism.

Findings

Activation tasks in frontline organisations

The job advertisements described the main tasks of frontline work to be:

- Counselling, advising, providing information to and following up with users;
- Assessment and identification of users' work capabilities and opportunities in the labour market;
- Collaboration with co-workers, other services and employers;
- Case processing according to legal regulations.

In a somewhat more elaborate way, the interview descriptions were similar, as illustrated by the following:

Following up with the users is the main task, including talking with the users, collaborating with them, planning, and identify measures towards employment. [...] Being 'out there' at the workplaces, helping people into a

workplace and following up closely to ensure that they find permanent employment. [...] Although there are regulations, there is a lot of discretion. Finding the right measure for a person can be difficult.

The interviews described the tasks as involving engaging in dialogue with persons in troubled circumstances; establishing effective working relationships that motivate them; seeing each individual and their whole situation; assessing their problems; seeking opportunities; finding tailor-made solutions to each individual, even for those who not yet are 'job-ready'; and planning work (re)integration, or, if necessary, securing long-term benefits. Tasks also included engaging in dialogue with employers and collaborating with other service workers, such as doctors and activation programme deliverers.

The task descriptions emphasised the mandate of the organisation: to assist clients to (re)enter the labour market. This statement introduced almost all advertisements: 'NAV aims to give people opportunities, and our main goal is to get more people to work'. The goal of employment was also significant in the interviews, as illustrated by the following extract:

The focus is work, no matter if you are a social assistance client or receive other benefits [...] Whether this goal is close or far in the future, it is important to not lose sight of it.

Another manager said that the job interviews were used to determine what 'good social work' meant to the job seekers. For this manager, good social work included a focus on activation, and thus, if the candidate's only preoccupation was securing the rights to benefit without mentioning the issue of employment, then the NAV was not considered to be their future workplace.

According to the managers, enabling employment implied that some motivational work must be done. 'Motivating' or similar expressions such as 'inspire', 'stimulate' or 'encourage' emerged in all interviews and many advertisements. Motivational work was to be performed in personal encounters with clients, creating a dialogic relationship that generated changes in the clients' lives by helping them return to work or 'get on with their lives' in other ways.

Desired knowledge and skills

In interviews and job advertisements significant weight was placed on academic education. A 'relevant' bachelor's degree was requested in the job advertisements of almost all frontline organisations. According to the interviewed managers, this was because it in general was required by national authorities and activation work should be knowledge-based, but also because the achievement of a formal academic education signified and certified that a candidate held certain capacities. It also signalled that a worker was capable of learning new things, a much-needed skill in an ever-changing organisation. In the interviews, the concept 'profession' appeared in relation to higher education and was used twice with 'occupation' synonymously in reference to educated health and social care professionals.

Social work was the form of higher education most frequently mentioned in the job advertisements, although only in advertisements from municipalities in which social work traditionally have had a strong position. One particular benefit of social work education was, according to one manager, that it includes practical training to develop the skills of the future practitioners, in contrast to, for example, what is provided by a classic university education in the social sciences.

Theoretical knowledge was regarded as a foundation upon which practical skills must be built. More specifically, almost all job advertisements (37 out of 44) requested 'relevant experience', a term which refers to skills to have been acquired in previous employment. The [Table 1](#) illustrates typical descriptions of the requested skills.

The skills mentioned in the advertisements and interviews included the ability to adapt and apply theoretical knowledge. Analytical thinking was desired as crucial to secure qualified discretionary judgements or in applying general rules to particular cases. Furthermore, communicative skills (oral and written) along with the ability to verbalise an assessment and a formal case decision were underlined. Sufficient digital knowledge and skills to use the service's digital tools and to guide the clients in using digitised procedures were also emphasised.

Table 1. Requested skills: typical descriptions.

From a municipal job advertisement	From a state-employed manager
<p>You must have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good competence in digital tools. • We wish that you: • are motivated to and will enjoy tasks involving extensive contact with users, employers and other partners; • have a huge work capacity; • are efficient and able to prioritise; • think work first; • are clear and possess good motivational ability; • have strong communicative skills; • handle and enjoy hectic workdays; • are creative, flexible and have good collaborative skills; • are service-minded and good-humoured. 	<p>'Good techniques in talking with people are necessary to motivate people to return to work'.</p> <p>'To see opportunities is demanding, as is getting the overall picture, seeing each individual and finding the right measure'.</p> <p>'We look for guidance expertise, which is very important'.</p> <p>'You can't just be good at talking to people. You need to communicate well in writing as well [...] and keep up with the advancement of digital tools'.</p> <p>'Experience with similar work is emphasised'.</p>

Desired skills included interpersonal skills in order to establishing effective working relationships with clients. Managers were interested in workers who were able to motivate others; see opportunities; approach each client individually and holistically; and find appropriate measures in each situation. The following quote from an advertisement is illustrative of this interest, as the organisation was seeking applicants 'able to instil in their clients trust and confidence and to inspire motivation and personal change'; there was also an expressed interest in those who were 'goal-oriented, creative, innovative or opportunity-oriented'.

Interpersonal skills were also viewed as essential in order to facilitate participation in interdisciplinary teamwork, contribute to coordinated services and the building of relationships with other professionals, agencies, services, and employers. The interviews revealed that for contact with employers, the managers considered current content of higher education insufficient and instead looked for practical experience from the ordinary labour market, perhaps that obtained through running one's own business.

Desired behaviour and conduct

The frontline managers were looking for not only competent, knowledgeable and skilled workers; they also desired that ideal workers be capable of handling resource constraints, assuming responsibility for the quality of their own work, and being committed to the mandate and mission of the organisation and its client groups.

The job advertisements requested workers who were responsible, independent, self-governing and autonomous. They also asked for workers who were able to make decisions to complete a given task; manage their own time; and use limited resources responsibly and efficiently. Other desirable traits included a strong work capacity, including the ability to cope with stressful work situations and hectic workdays; such an interest was expressed by terms such as 'effective', 'efficient', 'structured', 'flexible' and 'enthusiastic'. In interviews, the managers desired resilient frontline workers willing to give their all but able to avoid becoming exhausted and in need of sickness absence. The managers talked about limited resources and high caseloads requiring ability to prioritise without unjustifiably prioritising one client over others.

The responsibility expected of the workers involved acquiring new knowledge, developing personal competencies and assuming new responsibilities. As one manager stated, 'We want self-assured workers who are confident in their own capabilities and character, and who have a potential for personal growth'. Having the skill of critical reflection was also emphasised. According to another manager, a frontline worker had to be capable of self-reflection and of reflecting on the situations one is confronted with, including one's own behaviour in those situations. This capacity for self-reflection included the ability to transform new insight into personal change.

The frontline organisation sought applicants committed to their work. In the advertisements, variations of the following statement announced that 'We are looking for you who are determined and dedicated and who want to make a difference'. The advertisements also requested workers who acknowledged the importance of employment to the clients and the society; who understood the importance of the ordinary labour market to achieving the organisation's goal; and who approved of the vision, values and mission of the organisation.

The capability to handle the challenges of frontline work was also underlined. In the advertisements, this appeared as an interest in workers who were resilient when it comes to meeting and caring for people with major problems. Emphasis was given to the importance of positive attitudes regarding the user's resources and capabilities. The managers underlined that the workers need awareness about their impact on each individual's future. Managers also discussed how encounters with unpleasant users might affect the workers emotionally. Within this context, the word 'professional' arose in reference to the workers' abilities to handle encounters with clients 'professionally', or to avoid being unduly moved by the clients' troubled lives.

The advertisements mentioned the need for balancing clients' desires or expectations with administrative or legal rules and regulations. They expressed an interest in applicants who 'manage to see the needs of the individual as well as the limits set by laws and regulations' or who can 'encounter users respectfully, but at the same time clarify expectations and explicate regulations and restrictions'.

Similarly, in an interview, one manager stated that the organisation was looking for workers who could 'demonstrate confidence in people and humbleness in encounters with clients' but at the same time be 'capable of standing steady and making demands on the users', albeit in 'a motivating manner'. Another manager described such work as involving a balance between being able 'to assist and help, but not give too much help; you have to balance, not assume, the responsibility that belongs to the user'. When referencing the times clients are 'pretty demanding', another manager stated that a frontline worker must 'be patient and treat them respectfully' but also be firm or 'explicit, without being tactless or insensitive'. In the interviews, the managers pinpointed how such difficulties implied that frontline workers must be confident and with sufficient authority.

Discussion

Based on the literature on professionalism and professionalism within organisations, the following assumptions were outlined: Given the perspective that organisational and managerial control undermine professionalism, one implication could be that organisations implementing activation policies might not regard activation work as requiring discretionary judgements, professional knowledge, skills, and responsibility. On the other hand, given the more complex perspectives on the relationship between professionalism and organisations, managers could desire that prospective workers demonstrate forms of professionalism that embrace ethical, budgetary and service standards, and incorporate the conflicting normative demands and values. Our analysis demonstrates that (1) in many ways, the competencies desired of frontline workers align with key aspects of professionalism, and (2) the responsibilities required of frontline workers reflect the more complex relationship between professionalism and organisations, within which professional responsibility means active engagement with the organisational context of professional work.

The findings show that although frontline organisations implementing activation policies may operate within hierarchical regulations and accountability measures, they do not necessarily regard activation work to be at the discretion of a rule-oriented administration sufficiently guided by organisational standards and procedures. Rather, at least within the context of an enabling activation policy, activation work requires that each client be approached individually and holistically in order to identify the appropriate measures of a plan towards work (re)integration. Activation work also requires that motivating, trusting, and effective working relationships be established with the users. This perception of activation work as involving talk, dialogue, and guidance aimed at

motivating the clients is supported by studies of the way the workers themselves describe their jobs (Hagelund, 2016; Hansen & Natland, 2016; Håvold, 2017).

According to this interpretation, an academic knowledge base (acquired through higher education) and skills (acquired through experience) are crucial for activation work, as is the ability to make discretionary judgements and autonomy in doing so. Workers generally must be responsible, independent and self-governing. These are all key aspects of professionalism as advocated by authors such as Freidson, Sullivan and Shulman, and they are linked to the values of responsiveness and respect (Zacka, 2017).

Activation work also involves collaboration with co-workers, other services and employers. Professionalism thus involves the interpersonal skills required of a member of both a workplace and an inter-professional community. Such professionalism is 'connective' and has to relate to other professionals and the outside world (Noordegraaf, 2016). This form of professionalism is also organised; the outcome of professional services is a product of organised relationships rather than the actions of an individual professional.

In the literature, professionalism also includes the professional responsibility associated with the roles and behaviours of one serving as a professional (Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2011). This involves both a commitment to quality and performing in accordance with the field's standards and social contract, promising a service orientation to the clients and the larger society. Our findings indicate that in a manager's perspective, the 'field' may be replaced with 'organisation'. Professional responsibility is mediated via the organisational context of the work.

In frontline organisations, one particular aspect of professional responsibility is related to the professional self and the quality of one's work, an aspect emphasised in the literature. Another aspect of professional responsibility is to organise one's work in an effective, efficient and structured manner. Professionalism means managing one's own time and using limited resources responsibly and efficiently, and within these constraints prioritise and distribute fairly among needy clients. Professionalism in this sense relates to the values of efficiency and fairness (Zacka, 2017).

Furthermore, professional responsibility is related to the social contract of the work, as mediated through the mandate of the frontline organisation and the mission of enabling the employment of marginalised citizens. Professionalism in activation work entails that one identify with the mission and values of the organisation. This could be interpreted as a managerial demand for loyalty to prescriptions of the workplace. However, in the sense that the organisation's mandate is regarded as an expression of public interest, this is an expression of a professionalism aimed at advancing civic welfare and performing in ways that serve the larger society, as underlined by Sullivan and Shulman (2005).

Central in the frontline manager's perception of professionalism is handling the delicate balance between needs and obligations, or desires and regulations. It involves personal confidence and humility in encounters with clients. Clients must be approached in a motivating manner, and professionals must encourage clients to move on with their lives. Professionals must demonstrate the ability to stand steady, make demands on the clients and act within a set of regulations and restrictions. This latter condition could be regarded as an unduly imposition of organisational control on professional discretion. However, this interpretation of professionalism still involves the worker exhibiting authority in relation to clients, and, in line with a logic of professionalism (Freidson, 2001), it could be regarded as matter of integrity and not letting clients' demands trump professional judgements made with the clients' best interests in mind.

With respect to frontline organisations, a complex professionalism emerges, which echoes Noordegraaf's concept of a hybrid professionalism. This perception of professionalism engages with the organisation and embraces ethical, budgetary and service standards, and it recognises that frontline work involves balancing conflicting values and finding sensible compromises, as emphasised by Zacka (2017) as well as Solbrekke and Sugrue (2011). In this respect, this interpretation resembles the social work professionalism outlined by Nothdurfter (2016); with the capacity of dealing with ambiguities by negotiating, rather than resolving, tensions between conflicting values and demands.

Conclusion

The questions addressed in this article concern whether there are desires for professionalism on the part of organisations that implement activation policies (in our study, the frontline organisations of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration), and, if so, what these perceptions of professionalism are in their operation.

The analysis demonstrates that, in the view of managers who employ frontline workers, standardised work procedures or accountability measures do not eliminate the need for professionalism in activation work. Rather, the conclusion is that professionalism could be considered as essential for enabling activation work. The frontline manager's meaning of professionalism involves the possession of both the professional knowledge and the skills needed to make discretionary judgements in complex cases. Professionalism is also related to being and acting as a professional. It involves responsibility to the professional self and the quality of the work, and to the social contract of the work, as mediated through the mission of the organisation. It is a hybrid professionalism, in Noordegraaf's sense, that engages with the organisational context of the work.

Our analysis has explored ideal perceptions of competent frontline workers as these appear in job advertisements and interviews with managers. One limitation with these sources is that they present ideal perceptions of the frontline organisations. Job advertisements aim to appeal to desired applicants, and frontline managers with organisational responsibility might leave out any discussion of problematic organisational circumstances, which could obstruct the desired professionalism in practice.

As organisational representatives, managers are expected to represent the kinds of tensions and conflicts between professionalism and organisations described in the literature. Based on the managers' descriptions in job advertisements and interviews, tensions and conflicts appear between needs and constrained resources, clients' desires and the regulations of their entitlements, and individual treatment and fairness to all. However, from the perspective of frontline managers, rather than there being tensions between professionalism and the organisation, these tensions are incorporated into the very meaning of professionalism in frontline activation work.

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