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Getting the job done…!?
(Professional) challenges on the frontline of Public Employment Services in Vienna and Milan

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„Natürlich kommt dazu, dass wir auch alle Menschen sind und auch alle einen Rucksack herumschleppen mit uns. Das kommt ja auch dazu.

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Urban

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Abstract

Individualised activation services have gained in importance in all European welfare states making lower level discretion an intrinsic feature of activation policies. Thus, the debate on activation policies and challenges to social citizenship has to go beyond formal policy and to take into account also its operational and street-level dimension which shapes what is eventually produced as policy on the ground. In this context, frontline practice plays a crucial role since it constitutes the very moment where activation policies encounter their target groups and real world solutions have to be found.

This PhD project is aimed at exploring the challenges, interpretations and reactions of frontline workers in activation services and at analyzing them in the light of a combined theoretical framework which understands frontline practice as part of the policy making chain and addresses issues such as the use of discretion, power and situated agency.

The research project consists of an explorative qualitative study undertaken at the frontline of Public Employment Services in the cities of Vienna (Austria) and Milan (Italy). The findings contribute to the debate on constraints and possibilities for "activation work" as a practice of citizenship in a field whose challenges are often neglected both by social policy and social work research, although it has become a central arena for welfare state intervention and, eventually, for the realisation of social citizenship. Particular attention is given to the questions whether and to what extent professionalising "activation work" could counteract the precarious and highly individualised role of frontline workers in this ambiguous public domain.

1. THE ACTIVATION TURN

The broad shift towards activation in European welfare states

The first chapter analyses the broad shift towards activation as central policy paradigm in current welfare state development. In this context, it is highlighted, first, that welfare state development goes beyond a mere functional adjustment of existing programmes and institutions, but has to be understood always also as an ideational project and, thus, as representing changing ideas about the welfare state itself, the general goals of its interventions and the notion of social citizenship.

Against this background the chapter, then, critically discusses the apparently compelling straightforward idea of activation, pointing out its inherent and tensions both between structural conditions of new social risks and individualised responses to them as well as between the demanding and the enablig dimension in its politics.

Subsequently, the chapter briefly analyses the transformation of European welfare states taking into account both international and supranational influences as well as reform trajectories and typologies provided by comparative welfare state research and highlighting, on the one hand, a broad convergence on the ideational dimension and the increasing importance of the local dimension and lower level discretion on the other one.

Finally, the chapter critically analyses the challenges and impacts of the activation turn on social citizenship, not least in order to introduce the conceptual framework for analysing frontline work in activation services as practice of citizenship.

1.1. Welfare state change as an ideational project

Since the early 1990s, all European welfare states have been subject to substantial change and important processes of welfare state reform with the result that today's welfare states are very different from those inherited from the postwar years with their main efforts in securing income protection to male breadwinners (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002, Castles et al. 2010, Bonoli and Natali 2012, Morel et al. 2012, Evers and Guillemard 2013). In this context, questions about the relation between social policy and economic productivity, particularly in regard to a stronger nexus between welfare and work, have been high on the agenda. Of course, the traditional functions of the welfare state have not lost their relevance and they continue to be important, although also traditional programmes such as old age

pensions have been affected by retrenchment and cost-containment oriented reforms. As the literature on welfare state retrenchment points out, efforts at containing and reducing social expenditure have concerned European welfare states throughout the 1990s and 2000s, above all the Bismarckian welfare states of Continental Europe (Clayton and Pontusson 1998, Pierson 2001, Bonoli and Palier 2008, Natali and Rhodes 2008). These reform processes have to be considered as reactions to increasing cost pressures and they have, accordingly, been focused on cutbacks of existing benefit levels considered unsustainable over time. The early 'retrenchment literature' (Pierson 1994, 2001) argued these quantitative cutbacks constituted incremental adjustments while the welfare state as such proved to be quite resilient. However, over the years welfare reforms have increased in many countries. Reforms considered as unthinkable and unfeasible in the 1990s are now being adopted and substantial retrenchment has occurred even in areas of the welfare state which were supposed to be the most resilient ones (Ebbinghaus 2012, Bonoli and Natali 2012).

But welfare state reform is not only about quantitative cutbacks and cost containment measures. At the same time welfare state development has undergone also important qualitative shifts, which are not, or only partially, contemplated by a retrenchment perspective focusing on cutbacks and cost-containment. Together with instances of retrenchment, welfare state reforms have also seen changing orientations in social and employment policy with the rise of new policies and also expanding provisions in different fields (Andersen et al. 2005, Lessenich 2009, Bonoli and Natali 2012, Evers and Guillemard 2013). These new policies have been labelled and interpreted differently in the literature, but there is wide consensus on their substantial significance for the emerging welfare settlement in the early 21century Europe (Esping-Andersen 2002, Hemerijck 2012, Bonoli and Natali 2012). As Bonoli and Natali point out, "one of the most salient developments in social policy over the last two decades is the assignment of a new set of functions to the welfare state and the development of tools that go with them" (Bonoli and Natali 2012: 5). Behind this assignment of new functions to the welfare state stand new ideas on what the welfare state should be about, on which role it should assume and on how it should intervene in today's post-industrial societies. Today's welfare states are increasingly expected to bring non-working people into employment, but also to facilitate the conciliation of work and family life, to provide care services and to complement work income for the working poor. At the same time the field of social policy is considered as a part of the broader economic and political settlement of a country and the new welfare state is supposed to integrate fiscal, employment, social and education policies more firmly. Most of these new functions of the

welfare state go hand in hand with a stronger nexus between work and welfare and "can be seen as part of a broader reorientation of social policy from income protection to the promotion of labour market participation" (Bonoli and Natali 2012). In this sense, policies aiming at moving non-working people into employment constitute the core element of welfare state reforms all over Europe and concern increasingly large groups of state welfare beneficiaries, i.e. not only unemployment insurance recipients, but also other target groups such as social assistance recipients, lone parents and disabled people.

From a more economic and functional point of view, processes of reform were often portrayed as necessary responses to high levels of structural unemployment as well as to the growing pressures on the welfare state caused by increased competition in a globalised economy and by changing structures of society. In fact, traditional strategies to counter structural challenges in the economy by reducing labour supply and encouraging early exit from the labour market have become highly problematic both in terms of fiscal sustainability and against the background of increased global competition and demographic ageing of Western societies. Also the classical concept of unemployment insurance giving a legal entitlement to cash benefits and mainly intended as status protection for short periods of temporary unemployment has become increasingly insufficient in the quite different labour market settings of post-industrial societies with increasingly differentiated requirements, increasing labour market volatility and selectivity as well as with more frequent and more protracted transitions into and out of employment (Eichhorst et al. 2010). Moreover, unemployment insurance programmes developed on the traditional assumptions of the male breadwinner model and the normal employment relationship come to their limits against the background of a new set of assumptions labeled as adult worker model (Lewis 2007, Lewis and Giullari 2005, Annesley 2007) and in view of the expansion of atypical forms of work relationships and the de-standardisation of employment biographies (Clasen and Clegg 2006, Eichhorst et al. 2010). In this context, "there are good arguments for making significant adaptations to traditional structures of unemployment protection, as well as embedding it within a broader pro-active labour market strategy that sees an increasing emphasis on 'active' relative to 'passive' policies." (Clasen and Clegg 2006: 531).

However, the understanding of welfare reform processes has to go beyond structural and functional interpretations of adaption and must take into account also its ideational aspects. As Cox (1998) points out, processes of welfare state reform represent new ideas about the welfare state itself, about the general goals of public policy and the rights of social citizenship. In this sense, the reorientation of the welfare state from income protection to the

promotion of labour market participation reflects a departure from the ideas and goals of the post-war welfare state or as it has been pointed out metaphorically, its transformation from "safety net to trampoline" (Cox 1998). In fact, there is a growing interest in ideational aspects of social policy change and in different fields of welfare state development (Taylor-Gooby 2005, Culpepper 2008, Stiller 2011, Seeleib-Kaiser and Fleckenstein 2007, Schmidt 2008, Hoppe 2011, Fleckenstein 2011, Wincott 2011). Seeleib-Kaiser and Fleckenstein (2007) e.g. show in their analysis of German labour market reforms under the red-green government alliance of the social-democratic and the green party, how Germany departed from its conservative and corporatist path and changed its approach to labour market policies by clearly embracing a liberal workfare philosophy. Seeleib-Kaiser and Fleckenstein emphasize that traditional path dependence theory or other institutional approaches can hardly explain this paradigmatic shift and that the concepts of political discourse and social learning are key factors for understanding welfare state change. They point out the importance of interpretative patterns with their emphasis on certain policy themes, preferences, values and symbols in social policy development and policy diffusion.[1] Also Bonoli and Natali (2012) underline, that recent reforms in European welfare states have proven a remarkable shift in ideational perspectives and new ideas and paradigms "have gained momentum and shaped both the interpretation of problems and the definition of solutions" (Bonoli and Natali 2012: 13).

The growing attention to ideational aspects in policy change, and in particular also in social policy development, is reflected in a growing debate and body of literature on whether and how ideas do matter in welfare state change and on how ideational perspectives can be combined with more traditional institutionalist[2] and power resource approaches[3] which have explained welfare state development mainly by the structuring impact of political institutions and policy legacies. In the context of this work, referring to an ideational perspective seems

[1] During the last years there has been a growing interest in policy diffusion and transfer in comparative welfare state research. For a structured overview see Obinger et al. 2013.

[2] In the institutional literature, these approaches define institutions as cognitive constructs and structures and emphasize endogenous ideational processes in the explanation of change. This strand of literature, labelled as „discursive" or „ideational" institutionalism, „represents a dynamic approach to policy change, in which change (or continuity) is possible through ideas and discoursive interaction in politics" (Kangas et al. 2013: 2). For the reconciliation of ideas and institutions through discursive institutionalism, see e.g. Schmidt 2008 and 2011.

[3] Focusing on the administration of social assistance in Finland, Kangas et al. (2013), e. g. combine a traditional power source approach with a new ideational perspective in explaining policy change in order to show how the framing of ideas shape both public opinion and policy change. They show that straight forward framings, which simplfy ideas and appeal to moral sentiments are more effective in public opinion formation than framings which are more differentiated and represent more precise factual statements. However, the influence of such framings depends on whether they are embraced also by powerful political actors.

to be helpful to better grasp the broad shift towards activation and its paradigmatic character both in social policy development and probably also in terms of their impact on decisional parameters and as basis of judgement of the actors involved in implementation and provision processes. In this sense, rediscovering the role of ideas helps to understand how the perception and interpretation of problems as well as the political agenda for their solution are shaped by ideological repertoires. Moreover, adopting an ideational perspective means also to assess the role of different policy actors and to point out how discourses and processes of social learning are important aspects in policy-making in different contexts and on different levels. Béland (2005) attempts to integrate systematically an ideational perspective into an institutionalist framework of welfare state change. He carves out theoretical starting points from different institutionalist approaches[4] and focuses on the crucial role of agenda setting in order to develop a consistent framework which takes account of the substantial content of ideas and their impact on welfare state reforms. In this context, he rejects a mere rationalistic vision of policy making as responding rationally to well-known problems and argues that different social and political actors, also from the para-political sphere[5], seek to frame alternatives in a coherent manner and to promote them as consistent policy options. It is through these processes that abstract ideas are condensed in constraining policy paradigms and brought to the political agenda, or as Béland makes the point, "(a)gainst the impression that policy ideas have little consistency, it must be stressed that most alternatives are grounded in a policy paradigm which constitutes the structured intellectual background of policy decisions. These paradigms serve as 'road maps' to experts and policy makers by providing them with a relatively coherent set of assumptions about the functioning of economic, political and social institutions. (…) Far from being purely cognitive, paradigms are inherently normative and *programmatic*: they help policymakers decide how to reform existing programmes, or to create new ones." (Béland 2005: 8, italics in the original).

This perspective helps to understand how different new ideas on the role and function of the welfare state have crystallized out in a widely accepted political discourse and in the normative paradigm of activation which has been, indeed, a kind of road map in welfare

[4] Béland focuses on approaches, which have already considered the concept of social learning and the role of ideas in institutional literature. In particular, he refers to Heclo's (1974) distinction between powering and puzzling and his understanding of policy making as a "form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf" (Heclo 1974:305). Another important starting point is given with the reference to the concept of policy paradigm introduced by Hall (1993) and intended as "a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems that are meant to be addressing" (Hall 1993: 279).

[5] Horne (2002) coined the concept of parapolitical sphere as located at the interstices of business, government and academia.

state reform and brought about similar choices in social policy development across European welfare states. Moreover, this perspective is useful to understand the role of political and para-political actors on different levels. As it will be pointed out, the shift towards activation has also been emphasized by transnational policy advice as well as by parapolitcial actors and intellectual designers and opinion makers. At the same time this broad shift in social policy development has induced also a more prominent role of subnational levels in policy making processes and of dimensions which go beyond formal policy making on the national level. As will be discussed later on, questions of local governance and implementation have become important issues in the context of activation policies and lower-level discretion has to be considered an intrinsic feature in of policy provision.

This aspect is of fundamental importance in the context of this work as it is intended to analyse more deeply the role of practitioners at the frontline of activation services who are involved in direct interaction with target groups of these kind of policies and, thus, with the implementation of policies on the very ground and at the point where they meet people's needs. These aspects will be elaborated in the following chapters. However, this introduction intends to position the more specific topic of this work in the broader scenario of welfare state changes by pointing out from the very beginning, that reform efforts cannot be seen only as necessary or adjustments of already existing programmes and technical adaptions of the welfare state, but rather that they are grounded in a specific normative paradigm and ideational background. Thus, ideas matter. But to "become effective forces in history" (Weber 1989: 90) they must be supported, and implemented by different actors on different levels. Or as Geertz makes the point, ideas have to "be carried out by powerful social groups to have powerful social effects; someone must revere them, celebrate them, defend them, impose them. They have to be institutionalised in order to find not just an intellectual existence in society, but, so to speak, material as well" (Geertz 1972: 314). In this sense, understanding how social policy eventually is made concrete, calls for taking a closer look on how sociopolitical actors on different levels take up prevailing interpretative patterns of the social including corresponding solutions (Lessenich 2009).[6]

[6] *„Sozialpolitische Akteure haben also (oder machen sich zuallererst) ein Bild von der Welt – wie sie ‚ist' und wie sein sein bzw. wie sie vermittelt durch ihr eigenes Handeln werden soll (...). Diese Bilder aber sind im strikten Sinne keine je individuellen, sondern immer durch und durch soziale Vorstellungen:Die gesellschaftsgestalterischen Ideen (und Ideale) sozialpolitisch Handelnder reflektieren (und prägen ihrereseits) gesellschaftlich bestehende Deutungsmuster des Sozialen. Sozialpolitische Akteure nehmen ‚herrschende' Deutungen von sozialen ‚Problemen' und den ihnen angemessenen politischen ‚Lösungen' auf und institutionalisieren diese als Leitideen sozialpoliticher Programme, Einrichtungen und Intervenetionen (...). Sie vermögen es aber gegebenenfalls auch, kraft ihrer institutionellen Machtressourcen und womöglich gegen soziale Widerstände, die (...) Herrschaft*

1.2. The idea of activation

But to which idea(s) does the notion of activation refer exactly and what is its paradigmatic impact? As Eichhorst et al. (2010) point out, "(a)t first sight, activation is a compellingly simple idea. For people of working age, doing something useful – especially working – is much better than sitting out time on public benefits, however generous or meager they may be. This is certainly desirable for better social cohesion, solidarity and the long-term viability of welfare states and public budgets. It is probably this straight-forward normative idea that is responsible for the widespread appeal and success of policy measures introduced under the label of activation." (Eichhorst et al. 2010: 2). However, policies subsumed under this label are far more complex than the appealing idea of bringing the jobless into work and the term of activation itself results to be "tremendously versatile and thus extremely imprecise" (Eichhorst et al. 2010: 4). Very generally, measures of activating labour market policies meant to bring people into employment have as their common aim the removal of options for labour market exit and the unconditional receipt of benefits as well as the removal of individual barriers to employment. Accordingly, they combine demanding and enabling elements and policy instruments. It can be, hence, generalised that activation is characterized by two sides, or the two basic dimensions of demanding and enabling aspects, or metaphorically speaking by the "sticks" on the one hand and the "carrots" on the other. The conditional demands of activation concern the duration and level of benefits, more restrictive preconditions, sanctions for non-compliance and different individual activity requirements. The enabling side of activation is given by job search assistance and counselling services, employer subsidies, in-work benefits and training schemes. Most of these schemes can be seen as classical instruments of active labour market policy. However, in many contexts the activation turn has brought about a much stronger emphasis on the individualisation of services. Individualised service provision through case management is, hence, a relatively new but central feature, which has gained in importance in many activation policy contexts (Serrano Pascual and Magnusson 2007, van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007). Moreover, the participation in active labour market support schemes has

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eines bestimmten Geischtspunkts im gesellschaftlichen Deutungshaushalt zu etablieren. Die Frage, was eigentlich das ‚Problem' ist – z. B. die ‚hohe' ‚Arbeitslosigkeit' und, in diesem Kontext, die ‚geringe' Nachfrage nach Arbeitskraft, die ‚mangelnde' Arbeitsbereitschaft der Arbeitskräfte oder die ‚unkontrollierbaren' Investitionsentscheidungen multinationaler Unternehmen – und was dementsprechend jeweils die ‚Lösung' desselben sein könnte, unterliegt folglich einem permanenten gesellschaftlichen Definitionsprozess und ständigen sozialen Deutungskämpfen (...)." (Lessenich 2009: 52f).

increasingly become mandatory and the claiming of benefits depends in a stricter way on individual activity requirements (Lødemel and Trickey 2001). Anyway, there is a wide scope of possibilities for the conceptual and practical combination of enabling and demanding elements and what activation eventually means can differ considerably according to the relative importance given to these two fundamental dimensions. (Saraceno 2002, Eichhorst et al. 2010, Gilbert 2013).

What is of crucial importance in the context of this work is the fact that the balance between demanding and enabling is not only a matter for the formal policy context, but it can vary in each single case (Eichhorst et al. 2010). In fact, the emerging emphasis on individual responsibility to seek work and, thus, to be self-sufficient[7] through employment and the need for individualised service provision make frontline practice a decisive arena of activation. The introduction of individualised contractual agreements is a crucial development which resulted from activaton policy reforms (Gilbert and Van Voorhis 2001, van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007, Gilbert 2013). These contractual arrangements (often referred to as activation plans) "specify the clients' obligations and rights to participate in education, training, job search, subsidized work, and other activities to improve their chances for paid employment along with the agency's duty to provide a range of supports and opportunities aimed at facilitating the movement of clients from welfare to work. (…) This development has altered the way unemployment, disability and social assistance schemes operate. Administrative procedures for the allocation of benefits have moved away from the impartiality and anonymity of social rights framed by bureaucratic formulas toward the more individualized and discretionary dispensation of benefits based on case-by-case management." (Gilbert and Van Voorhis 2001: 294f).

It follows that welfare state reform under these paradigmatic premises goes far beyond the range of functional adjustments for the modernisation of the traditional welfare state, but they represent new ideas on the welfare state itself and a new normative background which concerns the relationship between the state and its citizens and a new recalibration of rights and responsibilities. As Eichhorst et al. (2010) point out, it is this new normative programmatic character and the relative emphasis on obligations which characterise the broad shift towards activation in general and which, more specifically, also mark the difference between traditional approaches of active labour market measures and so called "new" concepts in the form of activation schemes. "The normative philosophy of recent labour market reforms is one of reciprocal obligations. Hence, participation in enabling

[7] For a critical examination of the notion of self-sufficiency as a central policy goal see, e.g., Breitkreuz and Williamson 2012.

schemes is mandatory. This is the most important difference between pre-activation labour market policies and current settings. To establish a more formal link between demanding and enabling schemes as well as entitlements to benefits, integration contracts between the individual and the public employment service have become more widespread. On the one hand, benefit recipients are obliged to accept employment options or training schemes in order to receive benefits while, on the other hand, the state has the obligation to enhance the employability of benefit claimants." (Eichhorst et al. 2010: 6f).

However, what the notion of activation policies exactly refers to depends also on the academic discipline and the analytical interests of the respective discourses. From an economic rationale, activation is represented as the attempt to reconcile social security objectives with the demand of an increasingly dynamic and globailsed economy by countering work disincentives and by improving individual employability. In this view, activation policies must, on the one hand, intensify job search activity and the probability of accepting even low paid jobs. This goal implies stronger insistence on individual behaviour in terms of job search obligations and potential sanctioning in combination with stricter criteria for granting benefits. On the other hand, an economic perspective also emphasizes the enabling dimension of activation and, thus, policies aimed at improving individual employability and productivity in order to prepare job searchers for the requirements of the labour market and to make them more attractive to potential employers. At the same time, the economic point of view highlights that the effect of activation policies is mediated through the labour market environment pointing, thus, towards a flexible labour market as the complementary element to activation labour market policies which should provide the necessary (re-)entry jobs for the "activated" unemployed. (Eichhorst et al. 2010, for a recent critical stance see e.g. Avdagic and Salardy 2013).

A legal point of view focuses on how legal norms and regulations comprise means of activation on different levels and on how the recalibration of rights and responsibilities and contractual agreements between the individual and the state are defined by codifications and legal frameworks. As Eichhorst et al. (2010) point out, making welfare rights more conditional on individual activity requirements implies "legal changes affecting many dimensions of social and labour market policies, from rules of eligibility and entitlements, behaviour and sanctions to the range of activation measures available to the implementing agent, the organization, competences and resources of local welfare offices, the distribution of competences between different layers of the state, and the question of funding." (Eichhorst et al. 2010: 12). However, in legal terms the concept of activation turns out to be

extremely slippery and imprecise. In their comparative legal analysis of activation policies in different countries, Eichhorst et al. (2010) show that activation is not qualified as a precise legal term and that in reality it stands for a variety of concepts and means, depending on the general view of the legislator towards society. Normally, constitutional parameters in different legal traditions (even where they commit the state to provide jobs for its citizens and, thus, concretise the "right to work"[8]) set only programmatic guidelines and do not prevent the legislator from implementing different activation measures. On lower levels, the legislator disposes of a broad scope of legislative options to make activation work, both in labour and social law as well as in the field of administrative law (Eichhorst et al. 2010, Del Punta 2012, Mazzotta 2013). Although from a legal point of view activation is hardly traceable as a coherent concept, Eichhorst et al. (2010) show that there is nonetheless a common idea of activation which is the result of action and cooperation between labour market and social security/protection institutions and the jobseekers. This cooperation is regulated by a broad complex of legal provisions with the general tendency to transfer competences for the organization of activation to regional and local levels. Although a legal perspective might have difficulties elaborating a consistent view of activation, Eichhorst et al. (2010) point out some important critical aspects in the very nature of activation. "Activation is always Janus-faced. Enforceable legal obligations must correspond with legal entitlements and a realistic possibility to reintegrate into the labour market. This makes it difficult to qualify in legal terms the activation agreements mentioned above as 'contracts' since it is not the legal purpose of a contract to change a contracting party's behaviour but to provide an advantage for both sides. From the legal point of view, it is quite new and unusual for both sides – the jobless and the agency – that in all countries activation does not only deal with unemployment but takes into account the jobseeker's entire situation, e.g. health problems, need for childcare etc. This holistic approach makes it difficult for legal experts to formulate precise rights and obligations that can be checked in court. The slogan 'enabling and demanding' is striking and convincing. But in all countries there are indications that the legal duties are mostly on the jobseeker's side whereas the institutions have some considerable leeway in fulfilling their obligations. (…) This lack of balance between the two parties involved restricts the legal possibilities of the jobseeker. It is no

[8] This is also the case for Italy, where art 4 of the National Constitution states:
"La Repubblica riconosce a tutti i cittadini il diritto al lavoro e promuove le condizioni che rendano effettivo questo diritto.
Ogni cittadino ha il dovere di svolgere, secondo le proprie possibilità e la propria scelta, un'attività o una funzione che concorra al progresso materiale o spirituale della società."

mere coincidence that there is hardly any case law on activation. Few legal experts are interested or engaged in activation matters. (…) In all countries under study, activation is not a coherent legal concept but the outcome of a political decision to achieve certain economic objectives, notably to reduce the rate of unemployment and benefit dependency." (Eichhorst et al. 2010: 458).

While an economic perspective usually represents the idea of activation as imperative of actively encouraging the employment participation among all categories of citizens in the dynamic and volatile economies of post-industrial societies and a legal perspective has somehow difficulties to encapsulate the idea of activation as a coherent strategy within a legal framework, in a welfare state perspective the notion of activation has become a dominant concept in the analysis of welfare state change and a major topic of an overwhelming academic debate and an ever growing body of literature. Activation with its emphasis on the role of self-sufficiency, income and social inclusion through gainful employment instead of social benefits, on the one hand, shares in part the arguments of classic critiques of the welfare state as it considers traditional approaches of welfare state intervention as "passive" (or passivity creating)[9] maintenance support and, thus, as part of the problem (Gilbert and Van Voorhis 2001, Saraceno 2002, Gilbert 2013). On the other hand, tipping the balance in favour of a more "active" approach, activation does not mean the withdrawal of the state but its even stronger intervention in spells of unemployment and for the promotion of "active" citizenship. However, activation can have many faces and look very differently in different contexts and welfare traditions and depending, as it has already been pointed out, on the balance between its demanding and its enabling dimension as well as on its influence on different areas of welfare state intervention. Accordingly, the shift towards activation has also been discussed and interpreted very differently in the literature, e.g. as "re-commodification" (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002, Papadopoulos 2005), as "new" social policies or, more generally, as recalibration of rights and duties. Also the welfare state

[9] The distinction between „active" and „passive" programmes and social policies is a significant hint on discursive changes in the conception of social security. Sinfield (1999) captures in detail the changes in the relevant policy discourse pointing out the important role of international organisations, such as the OECD, in the discursive reformulation of the by now commonly used distinction between „active" and „passive" benefits and policies. While the notion of „passive benefits" contributes to a negative imagery of benefits as passivating work disincentives, the notion of „active policies" contributes to shift the focus and to transfer the responsibility on individuals who have to be „activated". Interestingly, as Papadopoulos points out, „(p)utting aside for a moment the moral undertones regarding the behaviour of the unemployed that are implicit in the use of the words 'passive' and 'active', it was never clarified adequately in the conventional literature why an adequate level of 'passive' unemployment compensation providing effective help during the period of job searching is contributing less to the activation of the unemployed than an 'active' seminar of vocational training." (Papadopoulos 2005: 13).

itself had been relabeled in different ways, as "new","workfare "enabling", "active" or, more recently as "social investment" welfare state (Peck 2001, Esping-Andersen et al. 2002, Gilbert 2002, Hemerijck 2012, Morel et al. 2012). Even Bill Clinton's winged promise to "end welfare as we know it" has been frequently quoted, also in the European context, in order to demarcate the fundamental shift towards a new paradigm of welfare state intervention. Obviously, the welfare state perspective does not offer only a variety of different labels, but there are also different approaches of analysis and strands of research, which address activation policies. Activation is addressed as analysis of single programmes, in connection with rescaling processes, and thus, with issues of governance and implementation and in relation to provision of individualised activation services. All these issues have been analysed also in a comparative perspective and in relation to the question of converging tendencies between different countries and welfare regimes. Last but not least, as has already been pointed out, there is also growing interest in activation discourses, in ideational aspects and the normative dimension of the activation paradigm as well as in its implications for social citizenship. The following paragraph gives a brief overview of different approaches to activation in welfare state development and of different attempts to define analytical distinctions and typologies of activation regimes. Subsequently, activation is discussed in relation to its challenges and implications for social citizenhip. To sum up here, it can be said that there seems to be a broad consensus in the debate on welfare state development. Despite different foci, approaches and interpretations, many scholars agree that the political project of activation stands for a fundamental paradigmatic shift and has opened a new chapter in welfare state development (Betzelt and Bothfeld 2011, Morel et al. 2012, Andersen et al. 2005, Lessenich 2009, Bonoli and Natali 2012, Evers and Guillemard 2013).

To answer, very generally, what the idea of activation is about, it can be concluded with Eichhorst et al., that "notwithstanding differences in the activation concept stemming from national or disciplinary backgrounds, the core element of activation is the removal of options for labour market exit and unconditional benefit receipt by members of the working-age population. Through the conceptual and practical combination of demanding and enabling elements, activating labour market policies aim at overcoming individual barriers to employment such as lack of employability due to long-term unemployment, poor skills and personal problems." (Eichhorst et al. 2010: 5).

1.3. Between recommodification and social investment: the many worlds of activation

The following paragraphs shows, first, the importance of international and supranational influences on activation concepts and policies in national welfare contexts. Afterwards, an overview on the debate in comparative welfare state research points out different approaches to and regimes of activation in the European context in order to discuss, finally, the convergence on the idea of a social investment state.

1.3.1. International and supranational influences

The broad shift towards activation has also been emphasized by transnational policy advice provided both by international organizations, such as the OECD or the ILO[10], and by the supranational level of the European Union (Hemerijck 2012b, Weishaupt 2010a, Armingeon 2007, Watt 2004, 2006, Casey 2004, Mc Bride and Williams 2001, Heidenreich and Zeitlin 2009).

Against the background of the diversity in unemployment levels, the growth in youth unemployment and the emergence and persistence of long-term unemployment in many OECD countries during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the OECD began to focus on unemployment as a structural problem and to outline a new political agenda aspiring for an "active society" (OECD 1990, Walters 1997). Analyzing the role of the OECD in the emergence of the activation paradigm, Weishaupt (2010) points out that "(a)t the heart of the OECD's reorientation toward an 'active society' was a cognitive shift in the cause-and-effect relationship between levels of unemployment and employment. It was argued that the mobilisation of passive reserves would improve the capacity of an economy, raise income levels (while easing pressures on the public budget), enhance social progress, and thus contribute to the creation of new jobs. In other words, this New Framework welcomed, rather than rejected, the general expansion of employment levels through the mobilization of women, lone parents, disabled workers, and other economically inactive, but not necessarily

[10] With regard to the role of the ILO, Eichhorst et al. (2010) point out, that due to its historic development, „the ILO sees itself more as a lobbyist for people in work and less as a defender of the unemployed or persons in activating measures" (Eichhorst et al. 2010: 11). However, also the ILO has been explicitly concerned with employment services and it conducts assessments and provides conventions and recommendations in order to improve their capacity to deliver and monitor the impact of active labour market programmes. More specifically the focus of the ILO in the area of employment services lies on supporting the reform and modernization of public employment services and on promoting both the appropriate regulation of private employment agencies as well as the cooperation between public employment services and private agencies (Servais 2009).

unemployed, people. To achieve this goal, the expansion of 'non-standard' forms of employment, such as part-time, weekend and homework, and self-employment, and the associated segmentation of the labour market was tolerated, if not embraced." (Weishaupt 2010a: 152). This new approach and the associated political agenda of the OECD included as its core ideas the shift from "passive" to "active" labour market policies, the improvement of the employability and the adaptability of workers through education and life long learning and the reorientation and reorganisation of Public Employment Services (PES). However, despite this new discourse, little substantive policy change occurred during the early 1990s. In 1994, the OECD published the OECD Jobs Study (OECD 1994), which became the main reference for the subsequent OECD labour market reform proposals. During the following years the OECD articulated ten broad policy guidelines, which were backed up by about 70 detailed policy recommendations and together constituted the so-called OECD Job Strategy (OECD 1997), one of the first international reform catalogues emphasizing the role of stronger work incentives and the negative side effects of social benefits (Eichhorst et al. 2010). Accordingly, the OECD reform proposals have often been interpreted as neoliberal prescriptions in which social policy is considered as braking economic development and in which the focus clearly lies on improving labour market flexibility as the key ingredient for job creation and economic growth (Casey 2004, Weishaupt 2010a). Also in the years after the launch of the Jobs Strategy the OECD continued to scrutinize and to question traditional active labour market policies (ALMPs) in regard both to their efficiency and effectiveness and to stress the need for stronger activation. In this context, the OECD began to increasingly focus also on the reform of national Public Employment Services (PES) and advocated for a new PES model in order to adequately address "further ways and means of achieving the efficiency objectives of active labour market policies, while continuing to meet their equity objectives" (OECD 1997: 6). According to this model, the core functions of PESs, namely unemployment benefit administration, job brokerage and the referral of the unemployed to ALMP programmes, should be integrated by setting up so called "one-shop offices". This closer integration of benefit and placement work as well as job brokerage and ALMP programmes was recommended in order to allow an effective application of work tests, to provide jobseekers with the skills needed by the labour market and to avoid long-term dependency on benefits (OECD 1997). Moreover, the OECD emphasized the importance of job brokering at an early stage of unemployment and the targeted and individualised approach in supply-side oriented activation policies and, thus, recommended the use of reliable profiling techniques and the grouping of jobseekers according to their job-

readiness.[11] The OECD recommendations have also highlighted the use of performance targets and "management by objective" techniques. This way, PESs are expected to become more decentralized and flexible, giving – eventually – also frontline staff more leeway to better respond to local labour markets and individual jobseeker needs. Accordingly, performance targets should be applied "on the basis of negotiations, mutual agreements, regular follow-up meetings etc. rather than in the form of rigid administrative procedures" (OECD 1997: 17). The OECD also explicitly recommended the modernization of PES governance structures through the embracement of a stronger service and market orientation. In this sense, the "ideational turn" (Weishaupt 2010: 170) of the OECD recommendations incorporated important aspects of the philosophy of New Public Management in order to transform PES into modern management agencies and, thus, "to 'reinvent government' and to recalibrate 'public governance' through (partial) privatization, deregulation, and decentralisation, while increasing competition, promoting new partnerships and introducing new incentive structures of both public employees and customers" (Weishaupt 2010: 170). In the 2006 edition of the OECD Employment Outlook (OECD 2006), the OECD provided an overall reassessment of its Jobs Strategy, which has been interpreted as less neoliberal and as positively acknowledging something akin to a European Social Model (Weishaupt 2010). In fact, the revised Jobs Strategy seems less concerned with labour market rigidities and contains a noticeable shift in its prescriptions from free market forces to innovative public policy mixes endorsing the role of some state-led capacity building, the combination of labour market flexibility with social security measures, the expansion of labour demand and stability-oriented macro economic policies. This reorientation of the OECD prescriptions towards "more carrots and fewer sticks" (Watt 2006: 11) clearly reflects a closer convergence to a more "European" approach and the acknowledgement of the good performance of the Scandinavian countries, especially Denmark (OECD 2006, Kvist/Pedersen/Köhler 2010, Weishaupt 2010). During the recent years of financial and economic crisis the OECD has reaffirmed this orientation and highlighted the need to respond to the economic and social costs of the resulting job crisis with adequate and accessible income support and by scaling up effective active labour market policies (OECD 2009). Against the background of persistently high unemployment and rising inequality in market incomes in many countries, also the 2013 Employment Outlook is mainly concerned with addressing the social dimension of the crisis through adequate income support and effective activation policies highlighting at the same time that governments have to face the

[11] For a critical discussion of technologies used to classify and categorise unemployed people on benefits see, for instance, Caswell, Marston and Larsen 2010.

challenge of "doing more with less" (OECD 2013), which should mean the challenge of better combining social and activation policies with shrinking fiscal resources.

Also the European Union has played an important role in the proliferation of ideas and in the shift towards activation of European welfare states. Historically, the European level had limited influence on the labour and social policies of its member states and the impact of the European integration process was mainly described as retrenchment of national regulatory capacities and as "negative" integration rather than as development of common policies (Leibfried and Pierson 1995). However, throughout the 1990s the European Union emerged as an important actor in the proliferation of new ideas and recommendations in the fields of labour market and social policy. As Weishaupt points out, the first documents and guidelines, such as Delors' 1993 White Paper and the guidelines proposed at the 1994 Essen Council, shared the vision of an active employment policy and also echoed the OECD recommendations. However, while the OECD had been, at least initially, primarily concerned with labour market rigidities and enforcing market mechanisms, the European approach put more emphasis on capacity-building state intervention and gradually adopted different strategies to lay the groundwork for a common employment strategy in the European Union. In 1997 the Amsterdam Treaty officially introduced the European Employment Strategy (EES) opening a new phase in coping with unemployment in Europe. The contents of the EES strategy were built around the four pillars of employability, adaptability, entrepreneurship and equal opportunities. The main emphasis, however, was given to the employability pillar which identified early and individualised intervention, skills and training as key issues. With the EES the European Union has been clearly supportive of a general activation approach as the strategy "embodied the normative view that 'good' social policy is an activating policy that prevents long-term unemployment through early, indivisualised interventions and investments in people, while consolidating the cognitive assumption that supply-side labour market policy interventions lead to structural improvements" (Weishaupt 2010a: 164). This ideational orientation had been confirmed also in the context of the Lisbon Strategy devised in 2000 by which the European Union committed itself to becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Council of the European Union 2000). The Lisbon Strategy also formalised the framework of the Open Method of Coordination in order to enhance processes of mutual learning and, thus, to improve the economic and social performance of the member states (Zeitlin 2009). The EES itself was additionally strengthened, also by

arming it with concrete targets to reach by 2010. In 2003, after five years from its launch, the EES was revised and simplified by supporting the overarching objectives of full employment, quality and quantitiy of work, social inclusion and an inclusive labour market by ten concrete recommendations, which were again coupled with associated quantified targets. The revised EES of 2003 was also more specifically concerned with regard to policy implementation and governance stressing the need for the allocation of suitable financial resources, the involvement of the social partners and more effective public employment services (Watt 2004). Parallel to the revision of the EES, the European Union developed a consolidated framework in order to allow constant peer-review and policy diffusion processes and to establish regular and systematic monitoring and cumulative reform activities (Zeitlin 2009, Weishaupt 2010a). The adoption of the "Integrated Guidelines for Jobs and Growth" by the member states in 2005 and their integration in the revised Lisbon Strategy has been interpreted as a neoliberal turn in the European approach and as supporting a stronger workfarist orientation. However, despite this shift, the European debate continued to adhere to the idea of a European Social Model and to search for ways to promote economic and employment growth without dismissing norms and structures of social protection. In this context, and inspired mainly by the Danish variant of combining lower employment protection standards with higher unemployment benefits and extensive active labour market policies, the concept of "flexicurity" gained in importance and was encapsulated in the Common Principles of Flexicurity adopted by the European Council in 2007. More recently, during the current financial and economic crisis, the EU has additionally reaffirmed that the main focus of EU initiatives should be activation. With the 2008 "Recommendation on the active inclusion from people excluded from the labour market" (European Commission 2008) the EU suggested common national and local strategies based on adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services and the 2009 communication "A Shared Commitment for Employment" (European Commission 2009) again explicitly emphasises the importance of capacity-building oriented intervention. Despite the potential of the Europe 2020 growth strategy (A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth) (European Commission 2010) to strengthen the social dimension of the EU has been critically discussed (Marlier et al. 2010), the objective of inclusive growth is, at least programmatically, also focused on measures investing in skills and in training and social protection systems. The 2010 communication "An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: A European Contribution Towards Full Employment" stressed the importance of employment services and employment assistance initiatives supporting at the

same time the greater conditionality in unemployment benefit receipt. However, the European key objective of full employment through activation has been highly challenged during the last years of financial and economic crisis and Europe has to deal with alarming unemployment rates, especially of young people, in many countries. Accordingly, the main concern of the current EU employment initiatives lies on reducing youth unemployment and particularly supporting young people not in education, employment or training (the so called NEETs) in regions with a youth unemployment rate above 25%. The most recent of the several European key actions and policy initiatives, the Communication "Working together for Europe's young people – A call to action on youth unemployment" (European Commission 2013a) sets out steps to be taken to get young people into work, education or training and calls upon the European institutions, member states, the social partners and civil society to work in partnership to accelerate the implementation of the Youth Guarantee (Council of the Euroepan Union 2013) and the investment in young people and to develop EU-level tools to help countries and firms in recruiting young people. With the 2013 "Social investment package" the Commission again emphasises a social investment approach urging the member states to "reflect social investment in the allocation of resources and the general architecture of social policy" (European Commission 2013b: 9).

However, while the emphasis on integrated activation policies is unbroken on the programmatic level, it must be also mentioned that activation policies are currently challenged from two sides in many European countries (Heidenreich and Aurich 2013). On the one hand the economic possibilities for comprehensive activation policies are seriously limited in many member states due to the economic downturn and the austerity policies in Europe. On the other hand, activation policies are also criticised for their negative effect on social security as the increase of expenditure in activation policies is often associated with reduced social assistance adequacy as they legitimate the reduction of minimum income levels and impose stricter obligations on benefits recipients. In this sense, some contributions associate activation policies also with growing poverty trends (Nelson 2011, Cantillon 2011).

Weishaupt (2010a) analyses and compares both the OECD and the EU peer-review and policy diffusion processes with regard to their role in the emergence of the activation paradigm and to their impact on domestic welfare reform processes. Both the OECD and the EU processes are based on soft mechanisms of coordination and on quasi-legal instruments and not on hard law. However, as Weishaupt points out, the EU peer-review processes are more frequent, more institutionalised and more rigorous than those of the OECD. Moreover,

while the OECD processes involve primarily technocratic actors who are in contact mainly with national finance and economics ministries, within the context of the EU review a broad variety of actors are addressed and involved, including also social partners and government representatives responsible for labour and social affairs. In summary, Weishaupt underlines that the methodology of the EU review is more far reaching than the one of the OECD and is, thus, also perceived as more contextualized and as a joint endeavour with greater possibilities of mutual learning. At the same time, Weishaupt argues, it is exactly the less decontextualised and more efficiency-oriented approach of the OECD, which makes its recommendations often more attractive to policymakers. OECD recommendations are easier to present as "hard facts" to electorates and, thus, more important as elements of "powering", rather than "puzzling" (Weishaupt 2010a).

With regard to their role as proliferators of policy ideas and as loci for labour market and social policy agenda development, both the OECD and the EU have gained remarkably in importance since the 1990. Initially the OECD and the EU offered competing sets of recommendations based on different cognitive and normative underpinnings. From the second half of the 1990s, however, a phase of gradual recalibrations on both sides has subsequently led to programmatic convergence on a common paradigm (Weishaupt 2010a). As Weishaupt points out, "(i)n the early 2000s, an increasingly coherent set of recommendations emerged and a common normative and cognitive framework became gradually identifiable. This new labour market policy paradigm was based on (a) 'activation' (i.e., early and systematic interventions, case management, and benefit conditionality); (b) a PES 'service model' informed by NPM philosophy (i.e., customer orientation, sensitivity to efficiency and effectiveness of public programmes, and a governance architecture emulationg private management structures), and (c) the promotion of employment through the use of 'positive' capacity-building public policies, supporting a more inclusive labour market, especially with respect to women and older workers." (Weishaupt 2010a: 186f.)

1.3.2. Activation: approaches, regimes, typologies

Some observers argue that international and supranational factors triggered and accelerated the shift towards activation and contributed to a remarkable convergence of employment and social policy startegies across European welfare states (Eichhorst/Kaufmann/Konle-Seidl/Reinhard 2010). However, the picture concerning this

matter is quite complex and there is a broad and ongoing debate on the questions of convergence or divergence in domestic welfare reform processes and on the possibility to distinguish different activation patterns or regimes among countries. The responses to these questions are far from being homogenous and they differ remarkably depending on which components of activation are taken into account, on whether they take into account only spending profiles of active labour market policy (as a share of labour market policy spending) and formal policy schemes or if they consider also the dimension of governance and service provision, and on whether they focus on the role of institutions, ideas or partisanship. In this context it is not possible to analyse this debate in a detailed way. However, the following paragraphs sketch a brief overview on the debate concerning different approaches and "regimes" of activation in order to contextualise the main focus of this work and to point out how important it is to take into account different levels and policy actors in order to understand how activation is eventually shaped along the policy making chain. In fact, with the broad shift to activation, welfare state politics have abandoned the idea of a "one-fits-all" welfare state in favour of a system of more targeted and individualized welfare intervention aimed to promote the activation of citizens in building their own social condition. However, the idea of activation and the corresponding policies are ambiguous by nature as they combine and, indeed, have to balance coercive features with some kind of investment in personal capabilities and social capital. This balance between the demanding and the enabling side of activation depends not only on national regimes and frameworks but is also shaped by implementation processes, governance models and local practices. However, it is useful to point out different approaches, policy logics and paths of activation in order to set the scene and to provide the bigger background of common directions as well as divisions in the adoption of the activation paradigm in Euroepan welfare states.

First of all it has to be pointed out that a strong emphasis on active labour market policies is not an ideational innovation of the activation paradigm per se. Historical legacies and welfare traditions show that in the Nordic countries active labour market policies have traditionally been an important part of social policy and also in countries like Germany and Austria, with their emphasis on vocational training, tools of active policy have been pioneered long before the activation turn (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004). However, although political determinants of the orientation towards activation are discussed quite controversially (Bonoli 2010), it is commonly acknowledged that the emphasis on active labour market policies of the Nordic countries and their approach and experiences with

activation have served as a role model and as a counterbalance to the narrow workfarist interpretation of activation in the liberal tradition, giving shape to a "more European" approach to activation. As Bothfeld and Betzelt (2011) underline, the political project of activation that started in the 1990 resulted "from the transfer of neoclassical economist ideas and norms into social policy" (Bothfeld and Betzelt 2011: 4) based on the idealtypical model of the economic citizen who is self-responsible and self-sufficient through labour market participation. This paradigm shift has had an important impact on the "reshaping" (Serrano Pascual and Magnusson 2007) of welfare states from the socialisation of risks and collective protection towards individual responsibility and protection. In fact, main features of activation strategies, such as the priority given to paid work as primary acces to social participation, the flexibilisation of employment relationships, the introduction of new labour promotion instruments, the restraint of social security provision and the reorganisation of public employment services, appear in most European countries. However, forms and meanings of activation can vary considerably and their expression in policies differs widely based on diverging values and path dependencies of diverse welfare traditions. Usually, comparative analyses depict a continuum of different solutions or activation regimes between the two extremes of workfare strategies in their strictest sense (see e.g. Peck 2001) on the one hand and more "generous" approaches of capability promotion (see e.g. Bonvin and Farvaque 2007) on the other. Along this continuum coexist hybrid and ambiguous solutions, which give leeway for different interpretations and ample discretion, which also account for diversity in activation policy outcomes (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004).

Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2004) envisage the notion of activation "as the introduction of an increased and explicit linkage between on the one hand, social protection, and on the other one, labour market participation and labour market programmes. (…) (T)his dynamic has implied the redesigning of previous income support, of assistance, but also the transformation of tax and social policies. This redesgning, or sometimes even overhaul of the entire social protection systems has displayed a common feature, i.e., that of enhancing the various social functions of 'paid work' and labour market participation, an individual behaviour which has even been seen increasingly as compulsory in certain national cases." (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004: 426). However, they challenge the idea of a substantive convergence under the "Anglo-Saxon influence" (Gilbert 2002) and refer to two distinct idealtypes of activation, the liberal type and the universalistic type.[12] In the so called

[12] Barbier and Mayerhofer (2004) discuss also the possibility of a third type but they argue that it is not possible tio contend a third, „continental" type idealtype of activation. However, more recent

liberal type the focus lies clearly on enhancing the individuals' relationships to the labour market, and active labour market and social policies take on only a limited role, being basically restricted "to inciting individuals to seek work, providing quick information and simple matching services, as well as investing in short-term vocational training" (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004: 427). Thus, in the liberal type activation manifests itself mainly as inciting people to be as active as possible and to accept any job on the market as it is, entailing this way both the re-commodification of the system and the retrenchment of social expenditure. In the universalistic type, in contrast, social policy much more retains its traditional contribution to wellbeing providing more comprehensive services and guaranteeing relatively higher standards of living for the assisted. Although a certain degree of re-commodification may take place also in the universalistic type, "activation applies to all citizens in a relatively egalitarian manner and the 'negotiating' between the individual's and the society's demands appears as much more balanced" (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004: 427). Against the background of this idealtypical juxtaposition, Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer compare the analyses of different European countries and conclude that the behavioural demands on citizens have increased across the countries taken into account. In this sense, both the demand of active engagement in labour market related activities and the increasing conditionality of benefits are common features of activation policies in different countries. However, at the same time Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer argue that the convergence is most promiment on the level of a common rhetoric and they stress, that "this homogeneity of words is certainly neither based on a homogeneity of values, nor of substance of programmes, rights and entitlements" (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004: 434). In this context it is of particular interest, that Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer underline the high degree of discretion as a common characteristic in most countries, which also in part accounts for their diversity. They argue that discretion can work in many ways, "it may be implemented in law (the degree to which regulations are mandatory or not) but may also depend on informal rules operating at street-level delivery. Whereas discretion usually is quite restricted or absent concerning benefit levels or duration, it may reach considerable levels if it comes to other 'offers' such as participation in training, job-creation schemes and the like. Also, the degree to which sanctions are applied (especially reducing or halting benefits) seems to be subject to tremendous discretion and consequently variation. We may note that, first, in the light of this it is often difficult to assess the actual degree of 'getting tough' at the unemployed (does a low number of

contributions (see e.g. Aurich 2011) provide evidence which hints to a more distinct path of activation in Continental welfare states.

sanctions indicate that the unemployed comply strictly with the rules set out for them or does it mean that PES (Public Employment Service) staff are very lenient towards a large number of non-compliant individuals?). Second, however, a substantial degree of discretion is endangering citizenship, as it makes the system less predictable and can lead to arbitrary decisions." (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004: 434).

Comparing different European countries, also Clasen and Clegg (2006) show how activation policies are nested in quite different trajectories of unemployment policy adataption. Clasen and Clegg distinguish three main orientations in unemployment policy reform. The first orientation is given by the activation of benefits, which means that unemployment protection is reformed in order to use the provision of temporary support as a lever to get the unemployed closer to the labour market and to modify labour market transitions. The second orientation consists in the increased coordination of unemployment protection with other policy streams and institutions, in particular the closer collaboration between adminstrations traditionally concerned with the provison of income protection and counselling, placement and training services. In this sense, programmatic reorientation and institutional reforms in labour market policy are seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing. The third main orientation concerns eligibility criteria and entitlements for benefits and services during unemployment. According to Clasen and Clegg, there is a tendency towards the homogenisation of unemployment support. Traditional unemployment insurance systems and, more generally, differentiated and two-tier (insurance and assistance) unemployment support schemes are increasingly standardized and aligned. However, this homogenisation of unemployment support "can in principle take a variety of forms, between the extremes of downward alignment of transfers on those traditionally poorly protected, and something closer to the generalization to all groups on conditions once available only to workers in stable employment" (Clasen and Clegg 2006: 533). Against the background of these three main policy orientations, Clasen and Clegg underline "that – 'beyond activation' – there is actually no single, universal dynamic of adaptation of unemployment protection systems to post-industrial labour markets in the recent reform trajectories of different countries" (Clasen and Clegg 2006: 534). Although their analysis shows a cleavage between countries in which activation policies are part of a more unambiguous adaptation of labour market policies and countries with more costrained, hesitant and uneven trends of policy adaptation, their contribution emphasizes that the policy paradigm of activation is generally compatible with quite different degrees of policy adaptation and that it can reflect variegated patterns of welfare state development. However, in a more recent contribution Clasen and

Clegg (2012) underline a multi faceted process of institutional realignment involved in contemporary labour market policy change referring to this process as a triple integration towards a new institutional template for a transformed employment structure. According to Clasen and Clegg, "adapting labour market policy to the transformed employment structure means challenging inherited 'divisions of institutional labour' between labour market and social security policy, between income maintenance and poverty relief programmes, and between provisions for different risk-groups in the working age population." (Clasen and Clegg 2012: 136). In this sense, Clasen and Clegg (2012) argue that the politics of triple integration are likely to produce further convergence on this new institutional template in the years ahead.

Also Dingeldey (2007, 2011) shows, that within the paradigm of activation and although single countries seem to align themselves to a particular welfare state type, there are different paths and an ongoing divergence in the transformation of the welfare state. In her comparative analysis of activating labour market policies, Dingeldey (2007, 2011) points out that different reform paths lead to different mixes of workfare and enabling policies and to different levels of decommodification and (re-)commodification in the countries taken into account. Concepts that address the transformation of the welfare state share the idea that traditional policies aiming at decommidification should be increasingly replaced with policies emphasizing (re-)commodification. Thus, activating labour market policies play a central role within the paradigm shift in welfare state transformation and across different countries they share common features such as the enforcement of labour market participation, the conditioning of rights and growing obligations of the individual on the one hand and the increase of services in order to promote employability and restore social equity on the other. However, Dingeldey (2007) reconstructs the workfare approach and the enabling approach as ideal types in order to get theoretical standards against which the empirical cases of active labour market policies in Denmark, the United Kingdom and Germany are compared. Dingeldey provides evidence that confirms the hypothesis of a paradigm shift and that shows that the countries move in the same direction, increasing both the workfare and the enabling elements in their labour market policies (with the exception of Germany which has strengthened its workfare elements while its enabling elements heve been in decline). At the same time the relative differences between the countries have been maintained and different paths and policy mixes persist. In this sense, although all the countries have shifted, their welfare state policies do not seem to be converging.

Similarly, also Serrano Pascual (2007) underlines, that in spite of the convergence towards avtivation as a common regulatory paradigm, this process results in very different policies, depending on the role of various institutional and ideological factors. Serrano Pascual's approach identifies different activation regimes as the basis for explaining, on the one hand, convergence on main features, such as the increase in availability assessments, shortening of benefit periods, increasing use of sanctions, wider redefinition of suitable jobs and the expansion of target groups, and, on the other, significant national differences in the content and the degree of activation programmes. According to Serrano Pascual the concept of regime allows to account not only for institutions regulating how power is exercised but also for the ideas and values, which legitimate these institutions and the ways social cohesion is established and justified. In this sense, "(a)ctivation regimes are the outcome of the fragile balance of power between the different actors involved in the design and implementation of these activation policies and of all the hegemonic regulatory and cognitive benchmarks that shape a community's understanding of the social exclusion problem." (Serrano Pascual 2007: 276). Thus, the attempt to distinguish different activation regimes has to take into account both the dimension of governance structures and instutional settings as well as the dimension given by hegemonic regulatory assumptions, i.e. assumptions regarding the meaning of work, the responsibility for social exclusion, the meaning of citizenship and the duties of job seekers, which act as cultural frames that not only influence policy design but serve as the very basic regulatory foundation and justification of these policies and its resulting practices. Comparing the reform processes in different European countries against this theoretical background, Serrano Pascual comes up with a provisional classification of activation regimes based on two factors influencing the type of activation model. The first one relates to the prevailing modes of "managing" individuals, i.e. the different ways in which the behaviour and attitudes of the unemployed are regulated. According to Serrano Pascual, they "span the two extremes of, on the one hand, a mode characterized by *moral therapeutic management* of individuals' behaviour and on the other, a mode of intervention based on *matching* workers' skills and labour costs to the new economic circumstances" (Serrano Pascual 2007: 294, italics in the original). The second factor realtes to the specific content of the social contract between the unemployed person and the State, or, "in other words the (im)balance between rights and duties or the balance of the *quid pro quo*" (Serrano Pascual 2007: 299, italics in the original). On this basis Serrano Pascual identifies trends in the modes of political and regulatory governance of activation and describes ideal types of different activation regimes.

The first of this regime types is labeled as Economic Springboard Regime and characterised by "the heavy emphasis placed on ensuring that citizens fulfill the duties in their contract with the community, in particular their duty to achieve financial independence so that the community no longer has to provide for them. This is accompanied by a responsibility-based understanding of unemployment where the State has the dual role of helping the unemployed to find work as quickly as possible and reaffirming work as the norm for all citizens" (Serrano Pascual 2007: 301). According to Serrano Pascual this ideal-type is best represented by the United Kingdom, where the main emphasis lies on coercive and work inducing aspects in order to ensure that benefit recipients fulfill their civic duty to find work as soon as possible. Personalised services are rather contained and hinting at a more therapeutic intervention with strong moralistic elements aimed to remember and to bring benefit recipients quickly back to what the "norm" is. (Serrano Pascual 2007).

The second type, named Civic Contractualism Regime, also shows a strong emphasis on ensuring that citizens fulfill their duties but at the same time they enjoy extensive social rights guaranteed by strong welfare state intervention. As Serrano Pascual points out, in this regime type "(i)nterventions still place great emphasis on individual responsibility, but in this case the underlying understanding is of the individual as someone who needs to be 'accompanied' in order to ensure that they can manage their personal development successfully. This type of regime is therefore characterised by delegation of employment services to 'intervention professionals' who aim to develop interventions tailored to individual circumstances and designed to strengthen the beneficiary's personality" (Serrano Pascual 2007: 302). A key element of this regime is the contract, which involves both a new approach to public policy management as well as an approach to managing individual behaviour. According to Serrano Pascual this activation regime type is represented e.g. by the Netherlands.

A third activation regime type, labeled as the Autonomous Citizen Regime, emphasizes both the individual and the collective responsibility as to the achievement of citizens' self-determination. The basic strategy in this model type reflects "the desire to ensure the continued viability of the prevailing welfare model which enjoys a high level of public support. While the job-finding process is still contractualised, in the case the contracts contain a significant degree of reciprocity and many things are left to the individual's discretion. The main focus is on a training-based approach resulting in the predominance of measures geared towards investment in the workforce" (Serrano Pascual 2007: 306). Serrano Pascual points out, that this model is best represented by Sweden where active labour market

policies have traditionally been an important element of social policy and where high public spending is combined with investment in long term employability measures.

Other countries, those without any coherent activation strategy, are subsumed under a fourth regime type, labeled as Fragmented Provision Regime. This regime type is characterised by weak policies concerning the risks of unemployment and poverty and, thus, by segmented safety nets and underdeveloped personalized services on the one hand, while on the other universalistic elements can be found in education, public health care and, in part, also in pension systems. In this regime type prevails a situation "where there are not only few obligations, due to welfare reasons, but where economic and political factors mean that rights and State Welfare benefits are limited, although the extent of State intervention varies from one part of the public sector to another" (Serrano Pascual 2007: 309). Serrano Pascual mentions Spain as a country belonging to this fragmented provision regime, but as it will be pointed out later on, also Italy is for certain aspects best represented by this regime type.

Finally, Serrano Pascual identifies a last regime type labeled as Minimalist Disciplinary Regime and "characterised by the limited extent of State welfare intervention to protect or support people who are excluded from the labour market and socially at-risk groups. However, although it is limited, it nevertheless contains a significant disciplinary dimension" (Serrano Pascual 2007: 309). The minimalist interventions aimed to ensure that citizens fulfil their duties are not equally matched by social rights and the coercive dimension of this approach cannot be systematically enforced due to lacking resources and ineffective public employment services. Serrano Pascual points out that even though none of the countries taken into account in his analysis is truly representative, Portugal and the Czech Republic come closest to this regime type.

With his typology Serrano Pascual tries to highlight different activation models and their modes of regulation. At the same time he underlines their common dilemma or, in other words, the fundamental ambiguity of the activation paradigm, which is less due to conceptual weaknesses of different models but reflects the contradiction of the current conditions in post-industrial societies. "One the one hand, the heteronomy and vulnerability of workers and job seekers is more evident than ever before, especially since the widespread acceptance of the fatalistic discourse of economic globalisation. On the other, there is a greater emphasis on the regulatory reaffirmation of ideological demands for individual self-management, whereby individuals are expected to be responsible for their own fate. Perhaps the spread of different forms of the activation paradigm should be understood in this context.

The risk is that this paradign will replace political regulation of the market with moral regulation of behaviour." (Serrano Pascual 2007: 313).

Weishaupt (2010a) provides a very profound and careful comparison of the experiences in the shift towards activation in Western Europe taking particularly into account six countries representing different welfare regimes, namely Ireland, the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. As analytical framework, Weishaupt uses a grid of four analytical dimensions, which, taken together, "comprise the core elements located at the work welfare nexus of any modern labour market" (Weishaupt 2010a: 62). The first of these dimensions is the ideational dimension concerning the normative and cognitive underpinnings of labour market policies. The second one is the organisational dimension, which includes the aspects dealing with the governance and delivery of labour market services. The third is the financial dimension concerned with both the sources of revenue as well as with the type and level of expenditure. The fourth dimension, finally, is the work-incentive dimension concerning both the negative and positive incentive structures of labour market policy regimes. The analysis confirms the trend towards convergence, first and foremost on the ideational dimension. As Weishaupt points out, "(b)y attributing joblessness to jobseekers' motivation and qualifications, policymakers increasingly believe in their ability to affect the level of unemployment through supply-side labour market policies. This *cognitive* shift has been accompanied by a *normative* reorientation and a new political agenda. Work is now seen as the best form of welfare, and policymakers of almost all political spectrums openly embrace the concept of 'mutual obligations'. With this turn to activation, the political agenda is no longer to merely reduce unemployment, but to activate all 'able bodied' persons, through which individual achievement and self-reliance is maximized, welfare state dependency reduced, and the sustainability of the European Social Model attained." (Weishaupt 2010a: 246, italics in the original). This ideational convergence has led to changes and convergence also on the organisational level. Weishaupt traces EU-wide reform trajectories of Public Employment Services, in line with the prescription of New Public Management Theories and international and supranational recommendations, as outlined above. This reform trajectories include the introduction of management-by-objective systems, third-party programme evaluations, the introduction of "one-stop-shops" or, alternativly, the closer collaboration between employment and local welfare offices (increasingly blurring the line between the rights and duties of unemployment benefit and social assistance recipients), the encouragment of partnerships of all relevant local stakeholders, the marketisation and competition in service provision, and, last but not least,

the contractualisation of the relationship between individual jobseekers and frontline staff through the use of individual activation contracts or action plans. As to the financial dimension convergence is, according to Weishaupt, less pronounced, both in regard to areas of expenditure as well as to the financing of policy measures, although the OECD and the EU advocated for shifting from payroll to general taxation financing. On the work-incentive dimension, lastly, the picture is rather mixed with elements of both convergence and persisting diversity. While in respect of the generosity of benefits country specific differences persist, there is a common trend toward reducing the duration of benefit receipt. Regime specific trajectories can, however, be indentified also in the strategies of "making work pay", with a combination of in-work tax credits and relatively high statutory minimum wages in the liberal tradition and the subsidising of employment and the raising of work incentives through tax reforms in the Nordic countries, while continental countries struggle with such strategies and still show significant "inactivity traps". In short, Weishaupt shows, that with respect to both positive and negative financial incentives, convergence is less pronounced and national and regime-typical differences are significantly maintained. However, in all countries the use of non-financial incentives has been intensified and similar measures are being used. As negative incentives they concern job search requirements, job suitability and sanction systems. As positive measures they consist in expanded job-placement, counselling and training services as well as in other additional services, not least expanded access to affordable childcare, even in countries with a strong male breadwinner tradition. To conclude, Weishaupt discusses the usefulness of traditional regime typologies after the shift towards activation. On the basis of the analysis of the different country cases, Weishaupt argues that Nordic countries have become increasingly concerned with cost containment, the effectiveness of their labour market programmes and the reorganization of their employment and training services introducing quasi-market mechanisms and reducing the influence of the social partners. These developments together with the diffusion of a growing self-reliance discourse has moved the Nordic countries closer to the liberal tradition of the Anglophone world. At the same time, the developments in the Anglophone cases show some clear elements of a move towards more state-led intervention and, hence, towards a more service centered model traditionally associated with the Nordic models. In the Continental cases, finally, there is evidence of tendencies which aspire to both the liberal and the socialdemocratic tradition. Continental countries "have increasingly adopted activation measures for insured workers and social assistance recipients alike, have engaged in attempts to bring employment and welfare services closer together – thus moving toward a more

universal approach – introduced quasi-market mechanisms for the selection of providers delivering occupational skills courses, expanded their low-wage sectors, and most recently began to offer state assistance and leadership in childcare facilities" (Weishaupt 2010a: 250). These developments confirm, concomitantly, both a stronger reliance on market mechanisms and a stonger interventionist role for the state and the challenging of core elements of the Continental regime type, including the principles of subsidiarity, social insurance and the strong male breadwinner model. In this sense, Weishaupt shows the persistence of historically grown labour market policy instruments pointing out at the same time that the activation paradigm has led to the mutual adoption of elements from both the liberal and the socialdemocratic tradition and, thus, to an institutional hybridisation of traditional regime types, which is most pronounced in continental countries. (Weishaupt 2010a).

Bonoli (2010) points out cross-national differences in active labour market policies in terms of both extent and overall orientation. Referring to traditional attempts of distinguishing between two general approaches of activation, a human investment oriented one versus a negative incentive oriented one, Bonoli acknowledges that such dichotomic juxtapositions[13] may offer "a useful starting point in making sense of an ambiguous concept" (Bonoli 2010: 439), but he also points to the risks of oversemplification and value judgement. Bonoli instead proposes two main dimensions of activation, which have to be examined separately. The first one "concerns the extent to which the objective of a policy is to put people back into demand driven market employment, provided either by private or public employers" (Bonoli 2010: 439) while the second one "refers to the extent to which programs are based on investing in jobless people's human capital" (Bonoli 2010: 440). Combining the two dimensions, Bonoli defines four different activation types, labeled as incentive reinforcement, employment assistance, occupation, and upskilling (or human capital investment). The incentive reinforcement type refers to measures aimed at strengthening work incentives in various ways, e.g. by curtailing benefits, by making benefit receipt conditional on participation in work schemes or other labour market programmes and/or the introduction of sanction systems. The employment assistance type refers to measures intended to remove obstacles to labour market participation, such as placement and matching services and/or counselling and job subsidies, but also additional services, e.g. for childcare. The occupation type is not primarily concerned with labour market (re-)entry, but its focus lies on keeping unemployed people busy and on preventing the depletion of human

[13] Bonoli refers to Torfing's (1999) disctinction between „offensive" and „defensive" workfare, to the concept of „positive" and „negative" activation coined by Taylor-Gooby (2004) and to Barbier's (2004) juxtaposition of „liberal" and „universalistic" activation.

capital. Corresponding measures mainly consist in job creation and work experience programmes in the public or the non-for-profit sector. Finally, the upskilling type is distinguished by both high investment in human capital and a strong promarket employment orientation providing better job chances through upgrading vocational training. Comparing the expenditure profiles for active labour market policies in different countries, Bonoli shows how dramatically the role of these instruments changes over time. However, at the same time there seems to be little regularity in the political determinants of active labour market policy and both strong institutional and ideational effects are contained in the interaction between economic development and labour market policy responses. However, Bonoli's analysis confirms also a strong push towards activation since the 1990s which has spanned across different regimes, "in fact, all the countries covered (except Italy) turned to the activation paradigm in labor-market policy, putting emphasis on employment assistance and on the reinforcement of work incentives" (Bonoli 2010: 451). This typology proposed by Bonoli (2010) is used also in Graziano's (2012) analysis aimed to assess the EU-induced convergence in domestic activation policies in the European Union. Graziano compares the expenditure profiles of different European countries (France, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden and Finland) and shows that some convergence between the different countries has occurred, but rather than in the direction of upskilling supported by the EU recommendations the convergence can be seen most clearly with respect to the employment assistance type since all countries have increased their spending in this area. In this sense, Graziano confirms only limited and selective EU-induced policy diffusion with respect to domestic activation policies. Besides the comparison of expenditure profiles, Graziano also considers the dimension of governance showing that also the governance of activation remains quite different throughout the European Union. Although both marketisation and decentralization processes can be observed in all countries taken into account, EU-induced influence in governance has concerned particularly those countries with more hierarchical and procedural governance traditions and with higher availment of EU resources such as the European Social Fund. (Graziano 2012)

Aurich (2011) also argues for a comparative model of activation based on different dimensions of activation. The framework put forward by Aurich adds a new type of coercive welfare to the common distinction between generous and strict activation. Aurich uses the two dimensions of incentive creation and active support as the qualitative yardsticks to assess change in unemployment policy. The resulting model displays four different types of unemployment policy logics, the logic of decommodification associated to an "old passive"

welfare regime, and the two logics commonly associated to activation, either with the focus on the creation of incentives (recommodification policies) or with the focus on the provision of active support (enabling policies). The fourth logic stands for a hybrid space in-between and is labeled as coercive welfare. Against this conceptual framework Aurich analyses change in three formerly quite different welfare states, Denmark, the United Kingdom and Germany, applying a fuzzy-set methodology. Aurich's analysis not only confirms significant changes in unemployment policy, but also reveals some new lines of division among the countries taken into account. While Denmark as well as the UK endorsed a strategy that pursued both the objectives of increased incentive creation and more active support and, thus, moved towards the coercive welfare type, Germany applied different models of activation to different groups pursuing a more enabling strategy with insurance recipients and a more recommodificating one with assistance (Hartz IV) recipients. According to Aurich these results "demonstrate surprising similarities between countries formerly seen as pursuing distinct risk-management approaches in terms of opposing types of activation, and in terms of overall welfare regime" (Aurich 2011: 313). Aurich argues for a distinct path of activation on Continental countries and points out that gradual developments and new diversity indicate cross convergence among countries, rather than gradual convergence or persistent diversity. However, Aurich also underlines the possibility for ongoing change and different dynamics in the development of unemployment policy, not least in light of the recent crisis. In another contribution, Heidenreich and Aurich (2013) focus on the local dimension of activation pointing out the crucial role of additional services for the success of integrated activation policies. The questions how useful activation policies are for the most disadvantaged groups and if the demanding and the enabling elements of activation are adequately balanced require a closer look on activation policies, which does not take into account only expenditure data but considers also the provision of both employment and additional social services. According to Heidenreich and Aurich, "(t)hese services play an essential role for the integration of disadvantaged groups. They are essential for including groups with complex social problems (e.g. low qualifications, indebtedness, health, alcoholism, addiction, housing, transport) in the labour market (Heidenreich and Aurich 2013: 2). The provision of additional social services can make a great difference and are an essential dimension of activation policies especially for the inclusion of long-term unemployed, non-nationals, low-skilled and the increasing number of young people not in employment, education or training. Heidenreich and Aurich analyse the role these services play in different countries. Firstly, Heidenreich and Aurich propose a typology which takes

into account the different roles and forms of employment and additional social services relevant for activation policies. Comparing expenditure data for both employment policies and additional services Heidenreich and Aurich distinguish four patterns of domestic activation policies and social services, labeled as comprehensive activation, compensatory welfare states, emerging activation regimes and residual regimes. Comprehensive activation is characterised by strong service-based labour market policies and in spite of their reduction of expenditures Denmark, Sweden and Norway are still the front-runners of this model, with the highest expenditure on active labour market policies, the highest replacement rates and the highest expenditure for family, education, employment and other social services. Another group of countries, mostly Continental European countries, labeled as compensatory welfare states on the move to more active employment policies, rely still more strongly on compensatory labour market policies. Their transfer oriented approach is characterized by a high share of expenditure for compensatory policies and a lower share of expenditure for active labour market policies and, particularly, for employment and social services. A third group of countries, labeled as emerging activation regimes, is composed of mostly Southern and Eastern European countries with slightly lower than average expenditure rates for labour market policies in general and, as most distinct element, with low investments in employment, family and other social services. Residual labour market policies, lastly, can be found in other Central and Southern European countries but also in the United Kingdom. This pattern is characterised by an expenditure rate for social policies clearly under the European average, by low social protection for the unemployed and by high incentives for taking up a new job. With the remarkable exception of the UK, the investment in employment and social services is also low. In sum, Heidenreich and Aurich show, that taking into account also the component of employment and additional social services, allows for distinguishing different types of inclusive activation regimes across European countries. Additionally to this expenditure data based typology, Heidenreich and Aurich take into account also the governance dimension of inclusive activation and, thus, "the role of the organisational challenges at the local and regional meso-level, where activation really takes place" (Heidenreich and Aurich 2013: 10). Taking one country example for each regime type and the UK as a workfare variant of the residual model, Heidenreich and Aurich analyse the countries' governance structure in reference to the five organisational strategies pointed out by van Berkel et al. (van Berkel et al. 2012b), namely systemic coordination, cooperation, public-private partnerships, decentralization of public employment services and individualised forms of support and control. Heidenreich and Aurich emphasize that the

governance of activation is confronted with manifold challenges, such as fragmented and overlapping competencies, difficulties in coordinating job placement and social services and, more generally, conflicts between national, regional and local levels. At the same time Heidenreich and Aurich argue, that "(t)hese organisational challenges are much more similar in different countries than would have been expected on the basis of the different expenditure types previously analysed, but the solutions are different" (Heidenreich and Aurich 2013: 22) and emphasize that this dimension of "(t)he organisational challenges of a coordinated provision of employment and social services therefore should be a core question of welfare and employment studies which aim at inclusive forms of activation." (Heidenreich and Aurich 2013: 22). The service component of activation and the concrete organisation of benefit and service provision come indeed increasingly in the focus of attention, not at least against the background of the current crisis and a growing need of inclusive activation based on the combination of sufficient income provision, active labour market policies and the access to social services in different European countries. Heidenreich et al. (2013) analyse strategies of active inclusion in Europe and identify, similar to the different patterns outlined above, three different active inclusion regimes in Europe, a comprehensive inclusion regime in the Scandinavian countries characterized by relatively high levels of minimum income, activation and social services, a redistributive inclusion regime mostly in Continental European countries with a lower level of services and a minimum inclusion regime in East and Southern European countries less developed in all the three dimension. However, again Heidenreich et al. (2013) emphasize that these institutional patterns do not fully explain the impact on national patterns and dynamics of deprivation and poverty in different countries. Decisive for understanding the chances for leaving poverty and employment is also the concrete organisation of activation and service and benefit provision.

In summary, all these contributions of the comparative welfare research debate, confirm on the one hand the broad shift towards activation and a general convergence at least on the ideational dimension and on the central features of activation. At the same time all of them also emphasize persisting differences, different paths, trajectories and lines of divisions not only among regimes or country specific activation strategies, but also within and underneath national frameworks. It turns out clearly, that although the activation paradigm and its essential assumptions determine the programmatic of welfare state intervention all over Europe, this programmatic also implicates the abandonment of and the departure from the idea of a "one-fits-all" welfare state towards the idea of a more decentred

(and decentralised) and individualised (and individually contractualised) and thus a more diversified (and arbitrary?) state intervention. In this sense, higher degrees of lower level discretion are indeed an intrinsic feature of activation and a common characteristic of different contexts, but at the same time they contribute to very different results in terms of what activation eventually means. Accordingly, comparative welfare state research is increasingly looking also on the local dimension of activation (Künzel 2012, Andreotti et al. 2012) and on the dimensions of governance and service provision (van Berkel et al. 2011, 2012a). As it is emphasised constantly throughout the context of this work, not least also the concrete practice of activation carried out at the frontline of these services matter in relation to how, after all, activation strategies substantiate and impact on the lives of unemployed people and social assistance recipients.

1.3.3. Towards a social investment state

As already pointed out, welfare state development is not only a matter of functional adjustment of programmes and cost control but is has to be always understood also as the result of new political ideas and commitments. Even though some scholars have promoted the idea of permanent austerity (Pierson 2001), which could have led only to retrenchment (if there would have been any change at all), the modernisation of the welfare state over the last decades has also involved an ideational evolution and, indeed, a reconceptualisation of the welfare state itself. As different scholars sustain, from the mid of the 1990s a new idea of welfare as social investment has increasingly gained traction and importance also as a counterweight to the harsh neoliberal attack on the welfare state said to create dependency and an ever burgeoning public debt (Lessenich 2009, Weishaupt 2010, Hemerijick 2011, 2012a,b,c, Morel et al. 2012). In this sense, although the trigger for the shift towards activation might have his roots in the neoliberal idea of the self-reliant economic citizen, the shift towards activation must be seen also in the context of new ideas on the welfare state and the move towards social investment. Anyway, the idea of social investment remains rather ambiguous and its early interpretations differ from considering it nothing but the wolf in new sheep's clothing (see e.g. Peck and Tickell 2002) to depicting it as a new chapter after neoliberalism (see e.g. Larner and Craig 2005). Within the recent scholarly literature on welfare state development there is, however, broad consensus on social investment as the currently predominant perspective for welfare state development or even as a new wave of

welfare state transformation (Midgley 2001, Lister 2003, Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003, 2006, Perkins et al. 2004, Mahon 2010, Hemerijck 2011, 2012a,b,c, Jenson 2010, 2012a,b, Morel et al. 2012).

According to Morel et al. (2012) there is no unified theory or a single intellectual source behind the new ideas concerning the role and the shape of the welfare state and different labels have been used for different ideas put forward. However, they have in common that they emphasise the productive potential of social policy and provide a new economic rationale for welfare state intervention. In this sense, these new ideas are a result of the critique of neoliberalism on the one hand, building, on the other one, also on the neoliberal critique of the "old" post-war welfare state. First and foremost, anyway, they try to respond to a radically changed economic and social order. Against the background of increasing polarisations, poverty rates, problems and costs of social inclusion, particularly in the countries which had gone furthest in the implementation of neoliberal policies, neoliberal social prescriptions have lost of their traction and have been increasingly criticised. At the same time the post-war and male-breadwinner oriented welfare state, especially in its Continental variant, turned out to be ill equipped to deal with the challenges and new social risks resulting from the transition to a post-industrial era with its new economy and the increasing social and demographic transformations of families and societies. These criticisms and challenges gave rise to the call for the modernisation of the welfare state "in order to address the issues of growing poverty and social exclusion, to better respond to the new needs and new social risk structures of contemporary society, to make welfare systems sustainable, and to make them 'productive' in the sense that they should promote and support employment and economic growth. Central to this modernization of welfare systems is the idea that social policy should aim at 'preparing' the population to prevent certain social and economic risks associated with changing employment conditions and family patterns, and to minimize the intergenerational transfer of poverty, rather than at 'repairing' through passive income maintenance after the risk has occurred." (Morel et al. 2012: 9). Also Jensen (2012a,b) points out the shared premises of the social investment perspective and emphasises its more positive role of the state compared to a neoliberal perspective. According to Jensen, the emphasis of the social investment perspective is "on policies for children and their families, on the future more than the present and on the societal as well as individual advantages of social investments" (Jensen 2012a: 28). Accordingly, a key aspect of social investment is the notion of preventive and proactive intervention which should allow individuals and families to maintain the responsibility for their wellbeing through

market income and intrafamily exchanges. This way welfare dependency and pressures to the welfare state should be lessened and the state should concentrate on its proactive role as a social investor. Jenson identifies three key elements in the programmatic of the social investment perspective. The first one is the notion of constant learning as the main guarantee of individuals' security instead of "passive" protection when markets fail. "Security has come to mean the capacity to confront challenges and adapt, via life-long learning to acquire new or up-date old skills as well as via early childhood learning. The objective of social policy is captured by its dominant metaphor. It is of a trampoline rather than a protective shield or a safety net; policy instruments should be designed to bounce people back into the labour market if for one reason or another they fall out of it." (Jenson 2012a: 29). The second key element is the orientation to the future. The idea of dimension obviously implies a certain notion of time and the reframing of welfare state intervention from "passive" spending and traditional policies in the here and now towards "investments" and policies that should prevent, prepare rather then repair, and pay off in the future. The third and last key element regards the link between individuals' circumstances and the collective wellbeing. The social investment perspective promotes the idea that investments in individuals are beneficial and pay off for the community as a whole. Investing measures in the present shall break cycles of poverty, enhance school success and individual employability, lessen crime and, thus, benefits everyone in the long run, not least by promising to limit future expenditures (Jenson 2012a).

Hemerijck (2012a,b) traces and analyses this "social investment turn towards capacitating solidarity" (Hemerijck 2012b: 46) and argues, that it marks indeed a new distinct phase of welfare state configuration. According to Hemerijck the political disenchantement of neoliberalism after the mid of the 1990 has led to electoral success for the centre-left in different European countries. This new political lineup and policy platform agreed on the need to transform the welfare state into an activating and capacity building oriented one. Intellectually, this new centre-left has been inspired by Gidden's idea of the "third way" (Giddens 1998), but as it has been pointed out above also both the OECD and the EU began to converge on the idea of social investment. A milestone, not only in the scholarly literature but also for the direction of the European debate, has been the report commissioned in 2001 under the Belgian Presidency of the EU to a group of scholars headed by Esping-Andersen and afterwards published under the programmatic title "Why We Need a New Welfare State" (Esping-Andersen 2002). As Esping-Andersen underlines there, "the single greatest challenge we face today is how to rethink social policy so that, once again,

labor markets and families are welfare optimizers and a good guarantee that tomorrow's adult workers will be as productive and resourceful as possible" (Esping-Andersen 2002: 25). According to Hemerijck the most important conceptual contribution of this proposal for a new welfare architecture has been its life-course perspective in rethinking welfare provision, which allows „to identify and to explicate better the intricate relationships that link care for children, the elderly and other vulnerable groups, to female employment and changing family structures." (Hemerijck 2012: 48). In this context, social investment advocates for the reallocation of social expenditures from social insurance and pensions towards active labour market policy, early childhood education and vocational training and family services in order to foster employment and productivity of both men and women in the knowledge based postindustrial economy. Of course, the economics of social investment do not purport quick fixes compared to the straightforward micro or macro solutions devised by neoclassical or post-Keynesian theories. However, it must be stressed, that „the social investment perspective does bring social policy as a potentially positive contributor to growth, competitiveness, social progress and political resilience back into the equation" (Hemerijck 2012: 50). In this sense, the economics of social investment on the one hand shares a nuanced reappreaciation of Keynesian legacies combined, on the other one, with a strong supply-side focus typical for a neoliberal approach. But, as Jenson (2012) argues „in contrast to the great wars pitting neoliberal monetarists against Keynesians, social investment was presented as a series of adjustments, a way of getting the incentives right or smoothing out the negative consequences of the intercations between markets and states. It was, in other words, an approach that retained much that was familiar from neoliberalism's universe of political discourse while returning to some of the social objectives of equity and even equality that underpinned Keynesian welfare regimes (...). Social policy gurus might have had to adapt their conceptual apparatus in order to be heard, but little dramatic partisan debate or political conflict within the state or international organisations was required. The OECD and other international agencies as well as national ministries of finance, all surrounded by their social policy experts, could begin to pay more attention to the social, without being forced to give up their preferred world views or policy instruments. The social investment perspective arrived more on the economistic ‚little cat feet' of fiscally based reform than with the *Strum (sic) und Drang of* neoliberalism's ‚new politics'." (Jenson 2012a: 39). What is important in this context, however, is the rediscovery and the reappraisal

of the state in ist new role as social investor and, as it will pe pointed out later, and the impact of this perspective on the state's citizenship practices.[14]

What has to be still mentioned in regard of the social investment perspective is, that the real stress test for the new social investment state is marked by the current aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis, which has caused a period of severe recession across Europe. Hemerijck (2012c) underlines that the long-term social repercussions of the financial and economic crisis are severe. The achieved employment growth in the EU, has been wiped out and strong increases in fiscal deficits and public debt have led to cuts in social transfers and welfare services in order to support public finance and economic stability. Hemerijck asks if the social investment perspective has been condemned to be one of the casualties of the crisis. Reviewing strategies of crisis management of different European countries both in the intermediate aftermaths of the 2008 banking crisis and during the following years[15] and analysing their current economic and political challenges, Hemerijck concludes, that, „the fundamental societal trends that necessitated a social investment perspective are as relevant and important today as they were ten years ago. Even more so because of adverse demography. Many of the jobs lost in the 2008-2009 shock will not come back. Skill mismatches will continue to grow, despite significant unemployment. For these reasons, the case for social investment policy is as strong, if not stronger, than before 2008. With fewer active persons supporting ever more dependents, low labour market participation is simply no longer affordable with the demographic changes now taking effect across the EU. Social investments, especially in older workers, that allow for combinations of flexible retirement while continuing to work, together with investments in life-long learning and continuous training, incur positive macroeconomic effects far beyond the crisis. There is no denying that a social investment strategy generates tensions and trade-offs between various social policy goals in the short term, but most important to emphasize is that social investment is a long-term strategy par excellence with high rates of economic returns and social rewards, in an era where human capital is swiftly becoming a scarce resource." (Hemerijck 2012c: 87f). In fact, the social investment perspective has received a renewed impetus with the „Social investment package" adopted by the European Commission and intended to guide the member states in using their social budgets more efficiently and effectively to ensure adequate and sustainable social protection and in strengthening people's

[14] For a critical analysis of the impact of the social investment perspective on social work see, e.g. Gray 2013.

[15] For an extensive analysis and explanation of the diversity of policy responses to economic crisis, see also Starke et al. 2013.

current and future capacities in order to improve their employability and participation both in labour market and, generally, in society. The social investment package focuses on integrated packages of benefits and services that should help people throughout their lives and achieve sustainable positive social outcomes. In this sense, it emphasises prevention rather than cure in order to reduce the need for benefits assuring, that way, that society can afford to help when people need support. Moreover, it explicitly calls for investing in children and young people to increase their opportunities in life. (European Commission 2013)

However, some recent contributions have raised critical aspects of the social investment perspective both in relation to its effective impact on gender equality (Jenson 2009) as well as regarding the social distribution of its benefits and its effective impact for poverty reducation (Cantillon 2011, van Lancker 2012, Daly 2012, Pintelon et al. 2013). With respect to active labour market policy, it has been pointed out (Bonoli 2010, 2012; Graziano 2012) that convergence can rather be found on employment assistance and on incentive reinforcement than on long-term oriented upskilling and that governments are more inclined to push in the direction of fast labour market entry in low-skilled jobs. As Bonoli (2012) makes the point, „(y)et the reluctance of European countries to embark on a major re-training fort the low-skilled offensive seems a real obstacle to the deployment of the social investment strategy. The imbalance between supply and demand in the low-skilled segment of the labour market is such that standard compensatory measures (tax credits, family benefits) alone are unlikely to prevent poverty, child poverty, and the transmission of disadvantage across generations: precisely the evils that social investment advocates want to get rid of.“ (Bonoli 2012: 201).

1.4. Activation and the changing landscapes of citizenship

As it has been pointed out the debate on welfare state development has largely been a debate on responses to challenges. During the 1990s this debate was dominated by a quantitative approach and a rather narrow vision of the welfare state which took into account only the dimension of welfare expenditure and the adjustment of existing programmes. Since the 2000 has also emerged a more qualitative debate on the ideational aspects of welfare state development and on the need to find new ways to reconcile the provision of welfare with better economic and fiscal sustainability and a new balance between the role of the

welfare state and other actors, in the first instance the agency of individual citizens in an active society. However, even this more qualitative approach has often focused mainly on the role of ideas in policy making and the diffusion of ideas in explaining welfare state change rather than on the implicit normative shifts of policy development from a citizens perspective of policy taking and on their impacts on the definition of the collective good of social rights.

Anyway, the recent years have seen an increase of literature which concentrates on the contemporary welfare reconfiguration in connection with the concept of citizenship and discusses the deeper normative change of activation and social investment to what is understood as the patterns of social citizenship (Andersen et al. 2005, Betzelt and Bothfeld 2011, Taylor-Gooby 2009, Dwyer 2010, Evers and Guillemard 2013, Jenson 2012b, Lister 2003, 2013) Of course, the point of reference in this regard cannot be but the notion of citizenship as conceptualised by Marshall (1992 [1950]). Citizenship denotes membership of a political community. Marshall points out how citizenship in England became institutionalised in a sequence of three stages, as development of civil rights in the 18th, political rights in the 19th and, eventually, social rights in the 20th century. As Marshall shows, in the 20th century "(s)ocial integration spread from the sphere of sentiment and patriotism into that of material enjoyment. The components of a civilised and cultural life, formerly the monopoly of a few, were brought progressively within reach of the many, who were encouraged thereby to stretch out their hand towards those that still eluded their grasp. The dimension of inequality strengthened the demand for its abolition, at least with regards to the essentials of social welfare." (Marshall 1992: 28). The notion of citizenship was, thus, expanded to include social rights and this social dimension of citizenship developed hand in hand with the emergence of the welfare state and the introduction of social security schemes, redistributive benefits, cash entitlements and social services. As Marshall points out, the social dimension of citizenship refers to "the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society." (Marshall 1992: 8). The implications of being a member of society are expanded to rights and duties associated with the prevision of benefits and services designed to meet social needs and to enhance capabilities. This significant extension of what it means to be a citizen had been possible only against the background of a broad political consensus with regard to the definition of the criteria for the organisation of social solidarity and, thus, on responsibilities, extensions and funding of the welfare state. Marshall's starting point for

conceptualising citizenship is, obviously, „the question of how to reconcile the status of the citizen – who, as such, is recognized as a member of a single community and as being equal in terms of rights and obligations to other citizens – with the inequality observed in a class-based society“ (Evers and Guillemard 2013: 5). Thus, the extension of citizenship to social rights was not intended to eradicate inequality entirely but to mitigate it by correcting, at least to some extent, the injustices caused by the capitalist market. By providing a certain degree of social protection the welfare state indeed constitutes the attempt to prevent social and economic exclusions that civil and political rights on their own could not avoid. This way the welfare state should, on the one hand, ensure social cohesion and solidarity and, on the other one, entitle the individual to live a life as a free and self-determined person. This rationale summarises the politics of social policy in a democratic and capitalist society. Accordingly, Marshall sees civil, political and social rights and freedoms as interdependent and as reinforcing one another in the democratic and liberal project of the welfare state. However, as Evers and Guillemard remember, „the extension of citizenship, while inconceivable without the establishment of rights, should nevertheless not be confused with a set of rights“ (Evers and Guillemard 2013). This is to say, that social citizenship is not entirely enshrined in a fixed set of guaranteed rights but that it necessarily involves also shared convictions and values as well as civic practices. Thus, the citizen can, on the one hand, claim certain rights and entitlemens, but on the other one, it is required from the citizen, as Marshall himself states, „that his acts should be inspired by a lively sense of responsibility towards the welfare of the community“ (Marshall 1992: 41). In this sense, the conception of citizenship presupposes a balance between rights and entitlements to ensure the social integration of citizens into the community, and duties and obligations that individual citizens in return have towards the community. These two sides of citizenship are often named – more or less aptly – as „passive citizenship“ linked to rights and entitlements and, as its counterpart, as „active citizenship“ referring to citizens duties and responsibilities. However, the notion of active citizenship leaves much room for interpretation and Marshall himself did not go into detail about the exact spelling out of rights and obligations (Evers and Guillemard 2013). On the contrary, he claimed that there is no universal principle for defining the rights and duties of citizenship. Citizenship rather implies “a vision of what each inhabitant of a society could become, an image for societies and their citizens to strive for.” (Johansson and Hvinden 2013: 42). Anyway, from this vision must be derived a political answer for balancing between the rights and duties of citizenship. Taylor-Gooby points out very convincingly „(t)hat the rights and duties of citizenship are set in a cultural

context of beliefs, assumptions and predispositions which influence how people behave towards one another and how society functions.“ (Taylor-Gooby 2009: 5). Looking at these assumptions and beliefs surrounding the notion of citizenship, Taylor-Gooby emphasises that welfare state citizenship rests on the three central values of reciprocity, inclusion and institutional trust. While the values of reciprocity and inclusion support and accept vertical and horizontal redistribution, the value of instititutional trust nourishes the political legitimacy of the system as a whole. This value of institutional trust, „is particularly relevant in the welfare arena because it determines whether citizens can be confident that their needs will be met when they are at their most vulnerable, in relation to both horizontal and vertical redistribution. For welfare states to function and maintain popular support, citizens must value both horizontal and vertical distribution and trust that the services provided are capable of fulfilling these functions. For a number of reasons, trust is increasingly in demand and at the same time increasingly under pressure.“ (Taylor-Gooby 2009: 6). According to Taylor-Gooby, during the last decades different factors have contributed to the decline in confidence in the institutions of the welfare state and in its capacity to deal with new risks and uncertainties. The economic and cultural impacts of globalisation and the difficulties faced by national governments which are confronted both with the imperatives of international markets and a more demanding and querulous citizenry, have significantly increased the perceptions of new risks and uncertainties and undermined institutional trust towards the welfare state. At the same time, the responses of the welfare state to these challenges have increasingly stressed the notions of activation and opportunity moving towards policies with a greater emphasis on mobilising as much of the population into paid work and on improving skills and individual opportunities. Taylor-Gooby’s analysis shows how these policies reframe the notion of social citizenship within the logic of individual rational action. The reframing of citizenship first and foremost in terms of choices and opportunities available to the individual citizens and the emphasizing of the active dimension of citizenship while weakening (and depreciating) its so called passive dimension linked to rights and entitlements, represents a shift from a more solidaristic notion of citizenship to a more individualistic one. As Taylor-Gooby points out this more individualistic approach to citizenship „is much weaker in sustaining a value basis for social inclusion and in developing trust beyond the rational calculation of coincidence between one’s own and another’s interest. It is difficult to sustain values of commitment and care starting out from a self-regarding exercise of reason, however enlightened and long-sighted. The individual rational actor welfare state encounters a growing deficit of popular trust and runs the risk of public

concern and disquiet in relation to its policy initiatives (...). It is weakened in the resilience and scope of reciprocity, the reach of social inclusion, and the vitality of public trust (...)." (Taylor-Gooby 2009: 186).

During the recent years, this reframing or remaking of citizenship in the general context of the transformations of the state, and the welfare state in particular, has gained in attention and a growing body of literature is discussing it in relation to its normative assumptions and its practical implications for citizens and society. Newman and Tonkens (2011), e.g., show that new formations of citizenship occupy a central place in welfare state modernization across Europe and beyond. „A range of governmental and political projects swirl around the remaking of citizenship: the restoration of national identity, the responses to the challenges of social cohesion in a globalising world and the attempt to reinvent relationships between people and the state. But at the centre of these struggles are notions of the ‚active' citizen: one who is no longer dependent on the welfare state and who is willing to take full part in the remaking of modern societies." (Newman and Tonkens 2011: 9). The character of this turn in conceptualising citizenship can be interpreted and labeled very differently, depending on which ideas are highlighted, social investment, individual capacity building or even empowerment and participation. Critical observers, however, point out an increasing moralization of welfare (Dean 2007, Rodger 2008) and a turn towards an ambiguous pedagogical programmatic of the state (Newman 2010). The turn to activation is often depicted with the slogan coined by Giddens of "no rights without responsibilities" (Giddens 1998: 65). As Evers and Guillemard (2013) remember conditionality is already known in Marshall's concept of citizenship and the idea of a right balance between rights and obligations has always been a central issue in the assumptive surroundings of citizenship. However, as Evers and Guillemard point out "(y)et what is critical and makes a difference to this past is what we would call 'educational' conditionality'. Under this label we would place those measures where a service or benefit is dependent on certain achievements, actions or types of behavior expected while it is being given, something that often implies a more or less formalized contract on the mutual obligations being drawn up at the outset." (Evers and Guillemard 2013: 23). The changing balance between entitlements and conditionality stands also in the centre of Gilbert's (2013) discussion of citizenship in the enabling state. Gilbert points out the normative swing from an emphasis on welfare provisions as social rights of citizenship to the social responsibilities of benefit recipients to behave well and to become independent as quickly as possible. Accordingly, the policy orientation shifts from "policies that were framed by a universal orientation to publicly

delivered benefits designed to protect labor against the vicissitudes of the market and firmly held as social rights, to (…) policies framed by a selective approach to private delivery of provisions designed to promote labor force participation. In the process, the balance between the rights and responsibilities of citizenship has shifted towards the responsibility to be self-sufficient. The transformation (…) is from a welfare state to an Enabling State, which functions under the guiding principle of 'public support for private responsibility." (Gilbert 2013: 89). This transformation rewrites the social contract recalibrating the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and making welfare benefits more conditional. As Gilbert makes the point, "this shift is embodied in the contractual agreements/activation/action plans that beneficiaries of public benefits are being required to develop, sign and implement" (Gilbert 2013: 88). According to Clarke's analysis of citizenship under New Labour, these shifts and recalibrations must be understood as a political and governmental project of remaking the relations between the state and its citizens which increasingly differentiates the population and applies different practices to different "target groups" (Clarke 2005). This aspect is considered also by Lister (2013) who points out, that "(t)he 'active' state was contrasted not only with a 'passive' welfare state but also, through the notion of personalization, with a one-size-fits-all welfare state. More personalized forms of delivery, often in partnership with the third and private sectors, spell greater discretion and reduced accountability." (Lister 2013: 141).

Of course, the idea of a more active welfare state and the attempt to change individual behaviour through an increase in the conditionality of social rights has affected different areas of the welfare state. However, the most evident and important shift can be observed in the reforms related to active labour market policies and income maintenance systems (Clasen and Clegg 2007). Betzelt and Bothfeld (2011) provide a comparative analysis of the impact of activation policies from a citizen's perspective. This focus is particularly interesting as comparative research usually focuses on institutional analyses of single programmes or policy outcomes on the macro level which do not take into account the deeper normative change to what is understood as the patterns of social citizenship, i.e. the logic of welfare provision and the principles of redistribution on the basis of citizen's social rights. But as Bothfeld and Betzelt (2011) emphasize, the focus on institutional change and output in social policy analyses and the disregard of a normative perspective tend to underestimate change in welfare state development as paradigmatic change might be often „reflected only by seemingly small institutional changes, which might occur unnoticed by the public debate and discourse" (Bothfeld and Betzelt 2011: 16). In this sense, the social citizenship approach

offers a perspective which takes account of both institutional and normative aspects and allows to analyse the relatedness between institutional and normative change in social policy development and, in this sense, to grasp the very political character of social policy. Bothfeld and Betzelt trace the normative arguments for welfare state intervention, namely justice, equity and membership and analyse, against this background, activation and labour market reforms in Europe in relation to their impacts on citizens' autonomy. Citizen's autonomy is understood, in this context, as a threefold concept with an individual, a social and a political dimension and Bothfeld and Betzelt identify three accordant policy dimensions which support or reduce citizens autonomy. With regard to the individual dimension of autonomy, the accordant policy criteria concern the quality of security provision, the policy criteria relating to the social dimension of autonomy concern the rules for defining social statuses, and the policy criteria relating to the political dimension of autonomy, finally, concern the mechanisms that encourage citizens commitment and participation. With regard to the quality of security provision, Bothfeld and Betzelt point out that activation strategies with their emphasis on paid employment often reveal to be at odds with a level of security which gives some leeway to autonomy, also in terms of planning one's own labour market integration. With regard to social status, activation strategies on the one hand increasingly blur traditional distinctions between unemployed and non-employed and unemployment insurance and social assistance beneficiaries. On the other hand this strategies define new distinctive target groups for activation. However, as Bothfeld and Betzelt point out, it is rather doubtful that activation strategies increase upward mobility in the labour market. On the contrary, the segmentation of labour markets has rather increased and the low-income sector has significantly expanded in many countries. Especially atypical workers are often being trapped in precarious dead-end employment. With regard to participation Bothfeld and Betzelt emphasize that the shift to activation has brought about a major concentration to employment as the main mode of social participation while other forms of societal participation (like e.g. care work) have been devalued. Summing up, Betzelt and Bothfeld (2011) point out that activation policies risk to lose sight of the state's responsibility for protecting its citizens' autonomy as the normative backbone of the modern democratic welfare state and this way also jeopardise the fine web of social solidarity which cannot be activated along the principle of "deservingness". What is also interesting in Betzelt and Bothfeld analysis is that it challenges or somehow overcomes the dichotomic juxtaposition between the active and passive side of social citizenship and points out its participatory dimension. Similarly, Johansson and Hvinden (2013) propose a more relational approach to

citizenship that "avoids a rigid divide between passive and active dimensions of social citizenship (regardless of how "passive" and "active" are construed), and instead seeks to view these two aspects as interdependent and mutually enforcing one another" (Johansson and Hvinden 2013: 50). What is particularly interesting in this context, however, is the emphasis Johansson and Hvinden put on citizen's participation and agency. While Marshall's conception focuses on citizenship mainly as a status, Johansson and Hvinden stress the importance to recognize citizenship as a practice, "that is to say, something exercised by citizens, and not simply a set of rights and duties" (Johansson and Hvinden 2013: 46f). This approach allows for seeing citizens as agents who can make individual choices and participate in decision making processes. Reconsidering the participatory dimension of citizenship overcomes a view of citizens either as passive benefit recipients or as being obliged to be active. Rather they can be recognized as subjects, agents who can play a more active role in handling their welfare by developing their strategies and by making their voice heard in relation to public services. (Johansson and Hvinden 2013, Lister 2007). In a nutshell, recognizing citizenship as a practice brings to the fore its very nature referring, as Lorenz makes the point, "to a force field that is constantly in the making and which develops dialectically and interactively rather than by decree or the mere passing of laws" (Lorenz *forthcoming*).

This perspective is particularly relevant for looking at the practice of activation, especially because of the aspects pointed out above, namely that activation policies implicate the move away from a "one-fits-all" welfare state, higher lower-level discretion and more individualised service provision. Although the recalibration of rights and duties under the sign of activation has obviously changed the „hard" legal framework on the formal side of activation policies, these policies have, anyway, to be put in practice by different actors. The interesting questions are, thus, whether "activation work" eventually allows for a practice of citizenship and how the assumptive concepts of citizenship affect the practice of activation at the street-level. Taylor-Gooby states that „(t)he cultural penumbra of social citizenship is of considerable importance in the day-to-day operation of welfare states. The law cannot be everywhere, and is most often absent when the interest of more vulnerable groups are concerned: Rights to benefits are of substantially less value if those entitled do not claim them because they are stigmatised or if they simply do not believe that the government is willing to meet their needs." (Taylor-Gooby 2009: 5). Van Berkel (2011) looks at the local and street-level implementation of activation policies, pointing out that „(w)hat exactly happens in the interactions between frontline workers and recipients is something we know

very little about: We know a lot more about ‚offical' policies than about policy practices. At the same time, these interactions are quite important from the point of view of recipients. In these interactions, decisions are made concerning the nature and content of activation, the assessment of people's situation, the evaluation of their behaviour, sanctioning and so on. These decisions are, of course, structured by national and local policy decisions. Nevertheless the discretionary room that frontline workers have implies that their decisions are never merely an implementation of official rules and regulations, especially where decisions concerning activation are at stake." (van Berkel 2011: 212f). Researching policy practices and their consequences for social assistance recipients' social citizenship, van Berkel shows how the emphasis on deregulated and individualised service provision in the context of activation leads to stronger and far more discretionary role of local welfare agencies and frontline workers in determining what social citizenship eventually means for individual social assistance recipients. „Nevertheless the social citizenship parameters as laid down in national regulations and the financial incentive structure in which municipalities operate, still leave unprecedented room for local, organizational and frontline work decision-making in the area of activation social assistance recipients. In principle, this has advantages as it allows individual needs, circumstances and ambitions to be taken into account when deciding about specific interventions. But there are no checks and balances that actually ensure that individual needs guide decision-making processes at the individual level: Other considerations, such as financial concerns, organizational capacities or frontline workers' resources, may be more important or even dominant." (van Berkel 2011: 215).

In this sense, activation reforms have indeed changed the landscapes of citizenship, not only in terms of the recalibation of rights and duties in the formal policy framework, but also, as Berkel puts is very convincingly, by "a process of localization (municipalization) and individualization of citizenship" (van Berkel 2011: 214). In this context, the frontline work in activation services assumes a crucial role in determining what activation and social citizenship, eventually, means for citizens in their ambivalent role(s) as clients, service users, benefit recipients and "targets" for activation. The following chapters explore the topic of frontline work in activation services both theoretically as well as empirically, based on a research project carried out in two different practice contexts.

2. ACTIVATION IN PRACTICE

Implementing activation policies and activation service delivery

The second chapter points out that the debate on activation has to go beyond the analysis of formal policy itself, i.e. substantial aspects regulated in (national) legislation (van Berkel 2011, van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007). Taking up central questions of the policy implementation debate (Hill and Hupe 2009), the introduction to this chapter challenges the idea of policy formation and policy implementation as separated processes or clearly distinct spheres by highlighting the mutual interrelations between formal and operational policy (Carmel and Papadoupolos 2009). Pointing out the interrelatedness between policy content and policy governance is even more important in the case of those policies in which lower-level discretion is a necessary and intrinsic feature of provision, as it is the case for activation policies (Brodkin 2007). Against the background of such a policy-action relationship perspective (Barrett and Fudge 1981) and the understanding of policy as „shaped, understood, enacted and experienced in a plurality of sites by a plurality of actors in a dispersed field of power" (Newman 2007: 365), the chapter is intended to point out that questions related to the dimension of governance and organisation of activation policies and services are not mere neutral technical issues, but that they are shaping what is produced as activation policies on the ground (or as a real world solutions on the frontline of services) and, in this sense, highly political.

Following the general idea that welfare state reforms affect at the same time not only welfare state arrangements and programmatic characteristics of social policies but also the dimension of governance for their administration, management and organisation (Clarke and Newman 1997), the chapter then focuses on main characteristics of activation service provision models (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007, van Berkel and Borghi 2008, Bredgaard and Larsen 2007, van Berkel et al. 2011) trying to analyse different dynamics at stake which often risk to be underexposed when referring to activation as a single lense or as a general trajectory of change (Newman 2007).

Furthermore, the chapter draws particular attention to the level of frontline work in activation services, pointing out that frontline work practice and characteristics are also shaping policies in their concretion and affecting their outcomes. As this dimension is at the heart of this work, different approaches to frontline practice are presented and discussed in order to grasp the different perspectives from which frontline practice in activation services

can be looked at and analyzed. Although the dimension of frontline work has been taken into account in the research literature on the implementation of activation policies (mainly with reference to Lipsky), it has been mainly framed as policy programme administration activity and discussed in relation to the issues of use of discretion and bureaucratic control.

However, there are some recent contributions (van Berkel et al. 2010, van Berkel and van der Aa 2012) that focus on the topic of professionalising "activation work" and assess the debate both on the necessity and on the feasibility of professionalisation processes in this field. In this regard, the chapter finally highlights and discusses different positions, one concentrating on social work as reference model for activation work, the other one speaking about "activation work" as a "new" profession (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012). The chapter finishes challenging this idea of a new profession and raising the question which kind of professionalism is needed, welcome and possible on the frontline of activation services.

2.1. Going beyond formal policy

Much of the comparative literature on activation policies has focussed on the formal policy itself, i.e. substantial aspects regulated in national legislation (Brodkin 2007, 2011; van Berkel 2011) assuming that the impact of such policies is mainly determined by formal policy programmes. Van Berkel (2011) challenges the assumption that the analyses of national legislation provides sufficient insight into the nature of activation policies and their impact on social citizenship. „Changes in national legislation concerning the substantial characteristics of social policies do not give us a complete picture of how welfare state reforms affect core dimensions of social citizenship and individual autonomy. The treatment of the target groups of social policy programmes, the nature of the support and services – these and other aspects of social citizenship are not simply regulated in national programmes and subsequently implemented by administrative agencies. They are actively produced in increasingly complex governance and organisational contexts that involve a large variety of agencies and agents in policy making, policy delivery and service provision processes." (van Berkel 2011: 195). What is produced as policy on the ground is shaped by the ways in which policy is translated into practice. Thus, the analysis of activation policies has to take also into account the dimension of policy implementation or, as Brodkin brings it to the point, „(t)he less glamorous but fundamental challenge lies in the seemingly mudane functions of

administration“ (Brodkin 2007: 2), even more „in the case of those social policies in which lower-level discretion is often a necessary and intrinsic feature of provision“ (Brodkin 2007: 2), as it is definitely the case for activation policies with their emphasis on individualization and tailor-made services.

But the implementation and administration of activation policies entails a variety of complex interrelated processes concerning the level of governance, i.e. the roles and responsibilities of actors and agencies involved in policy making and implementation, as well as the level of the organisation of service delivery and, within this context, the dimension of daily street-level work. In fact, during the last years there has developed an important research strand on activation which addresses the central question of implementation research, namely „(w)hat happens between the establishment of policy and its impact in the world of action?“ (O'Toole 2000: 273). As Hill and Hupe (2009) point out, implementation theory and research have developed as a sub-discipline between political science and public administration. Based on the classical controversy between top-down and bottom-up perspectives implementation theorists nowadays try to go beyond this dichotomy and develop implementation research through a synthesis of top-down and bottom-up approaches blurring to some extent also the boundaries between policy formation and implementation (Hill and Hupe 2009). Actually, in the field of research on activation policies a lot of insightful work is being done bringing together a social policy perspective on national and subnational programmes regulating substantial aspects of formal policies with insights from governance and public administration studies, and challenging this way the idea of policy as a fixed and clear set of goals and strategies which implementation and administration simply need to follow. Rather they refer to what implementation theorists Barrett and Fudge (1981) call the “policy-action relationship”, namely the processes of interaction, negotiation and decision making which translate and transform the governmental intention of stated policy into its actual reponses and outcomes in practice. Opening up of the „black box“ of what comes after adopting formal policy has challenged the ideas of policy as arriving fully formed from above and of its implementation as a neutral and mere technical process. Instead, it has been highlighted the idea of policy as dynamic and unfinished domain „shaped, understood, enacted and experienced in a plurality of sites by a plurality of actors in a dispersed field of power“ (Newman, 2007). With regard to activation policies, van Berkel (2011) distinguishes between the social policy perspective referring to formal policy programmes, the governance perspective concerning the structure of actors involved in policy making and implementation with their roles, responsibilities and interrelations and,

finally, the organisational perspective referring to street-leel organisations and service delivery. With respect to the governance perspective, different scholars have pointed out that new public management and new governance reforms have significantly influenced the ways in which activation programmes are governed and how their implementation is managed and organised (Clarke and Newman 1997, Weishaupt 2010b). The impact of these reforms refers to the actors involved in policy making and delivery, to their roles, responsibilities and mutual relationships and to the ways their actions are steered and coordinated. In this sense, it is important to point out that new modes of governance and new management ideas are not neutral in terms of their impact on the nature and accesibility of the services offered as well as on the ways people are treated in these services and, thus, also on the consequences for the concretion of social citizenship (van Berkel 2011).

2.2. Governance of what?

Before pointing out the central features in the governance of activation identified by the scholarly literature, it is worth looking at the concept of governance itself, also in order to better grasp its political impact. The concept of governance is used in a variety of disciplines and ways and it is neither possible nor useful in the context of this work, to give an overwiew over the different uses and definitions of the term. Although even in the specific literature „governance“ is often seen as a vague and contested term, it can be summed up here, that governance evokes a more pluralistic pattern as government focussing less on state insititutions and more both on the connections between the state and supra- and subnational levels as well as on the processes and interactions between state and civil society. Furthermore, the concept has spread in connection with new theories of politics and of new public sector reforms (Benz and Dose 2010; Bevir 2010; Treib et al. 2007). Accordingly, in the context of welfare state research the concept of governance is often used to depict both the shift from government to governance, i.e. towards less state-centred modes of welfare provision or/and to refer to a network mode of organising collective action (van Berkel and Borghi 2008).

A very useful insight is provided by Daly (2003) who distinguishes the embedment of the concept in different academic discourses, each of them offering a specific perspective on processes of welfare state reform. A first discourse refers to the state’s capacities and competences to deal with social issues and to provide welfare, focussing on the different

actors involved in the provision of public goods and services and on their interrelationships and on the implied questions of definition of the public good and of public responsibility. A second discourse strand focuses specifically on the European Union, taking into account supranational politics and the increasing multilevel governance in European welfare states. The third discourse, finally, is about the governance of people or as Clarke points out „reflects an interest in governing as the practices of managing populations and their conduct" (Clarke 2004: 111). It relates to issues such as the social construction of target groups of different programmes, the definition of their problems and the nature of interventions and as such, in short, to the governance of people on whom services are targeted (Daly 2003). As the large literature on activation shows, all these discourses are relevant and provide important perspectives for researching the governance of activation in relation to the issues of public responsibility and the nature of state intervention (see e.g. Gilbert 2002), to international trends and supranational strategies (see e.g. Weishaupt 2010a,) as well as on rescaling processes and local governance (see e.g. Sabatinelli 2010) and on the main features of service provision models.

Anyway the perspective provided by the third discourse strand on governance as managing people and their conduct shows, that all these aspects and issues cannot be seen in a disconnected way and, to put it very simple, that the governance of activation has always to do with what happens to people in practice. As Berkel and Borghi make the point, „questions concerning the governance and management of agencies and institutions involved in the administration and implementation of activation policies are linked with questions concerning the governance and management of the people at whom the services provided by these agencies and institutions are targeted." (van Berkel and Borghi 2008: 333).

This perspective relates back to the general idea that the welfare state reforms over the last decades have affected at the same time and in an interrelated way both the dimensions of programmatic characteristics of social policies and welfare state arrangements and the dimension of governance underlying the administration, management and organisation of these policies and arrangements (Clarke and Newman 1997). Relating to the distinction between formal and operational policy proposed by Carmel and Papadoupolos (2009) with formal policy referring to the „what" of policies and services, i.e. their programmatic characteristics, and operational policy to the „how" of policies, i.e. to issues regarding their organisation, administration and delivery, it can be pointed out that the „what" and the „how" are interrelated and that also the operational dimension of social policy is relevant for the process of policy making in a broader sense. This approach clearly shows that the

implications and impacts of activation policies can be captured only by going beyond the formal policy and by analyzing what is going on at the level of local governance and street-level provision of activation services. Although the focus of this work lies clearly on frontline work, where activation strategies eventually materialise and confront people's needs, it is important to understand the context in which street-level work is done and to critically explore the challenges deriving from these contextual circumstances, an aspect that has not yet obtained particular attention even though the importance of the street-level has increasingly been taken into account. Hence, before moving down to the central aspect of frontline work and to present the different approaches of the theoretical framework, the next paragraph focuses on main characteristics of activation service provision models trying to critically unpack different dynamics which often risk to be underexposed when referring to activation as a single lens or as a general trajectory of change without carving out its ambivalences and possible tensions (Newman 2007).

2.3. Activation service provision models

As already pointed out, the intervention paradigm based on the concept of activation is characterized by some main and interrelated features such as an individualised approach, an emphasis on employment and the element of contractualisation as one of its core principles (Serrano Pascual 2007). Activation policies favour both an increased individualisation of interventions through tailored and client-centred services and a stronger involvement of service beneficiaries, as they are focused on the individual employability and as such also on influencing individual behavior in relation to labour market integration. In this context, the element of contract has become the fundamental metaphor for guiding and legitimating this kind of services and standing at the same time for a paradigmatic change in terms of the social contract making rights increasingly conditional on responsible individual behaviour. In this sense, the contract „has become more of a moral contract than a social or political one. Citizens' access to their rights is now conditional on their attitude and behaviour with regard to their employment. In addition to the contract as a key social regulation mechanism, the ‚reciprocity norm' is reaffirmed, and ‚deservingness' becomes one of the key principles underpinning the legitimacy of citizenship itself." (Serrano Pascual 2007: 14). It's not least against this background, that issues related to the governance of activation policies and the organisation of individualised service provision have gained in importance and, hence,

increasingly attracted notice both by theoretical considerations as well as by empirical implementation research. However, before giving a brief overview on the main characteristics discussed in the literature with respect to new modes of governance and service provision models, it is useful to underline again, with Berkel (2007), that „the trend towards individualized service provision is not a merely ‚technical' or ‚methodical' issue regarding the way in which services should be delivered. Instead, it is embedded in, and part of, processes aimed at reforming social policies and their governance, which, in their turn are taking place in order to cope with broader, economic, cultural and demographic and social developments. In other words, discussing individualised activation services unavoidably raises questions regarding the necessity, feasibility and desirability of the welfare state transformations of which they are an integral part." (van Berkel 2007: 245). This understanding, together with the conception of policy as decentered (Bevir and Rhodes 2010, Evans and Hardy 2010) and as a dynamic process, is the necessary basis of a heuristic framework which allows to grasp both the larger picture of societal transformation underlying the issues of governance of activation policies and, eventually, also the political significance of frontline activation work. In this sense, the following paragraphs highlight the main features discussed in relation to new modes of governance and service provision models in the context of activation policies, trying to critically unpack different dynamics and possible tensions and to highlight different entry points for a deeper understanding of ambiguities and challenges which eventually concentrate in the burning glass of frontline practice.

2.3.1. Rescaling processes

Van Berkel and Borghi (2008) highlight several aspects of new welfare service provision models introduced all over Europe. One central aspect pointed out is what has been described as the „rescaling" of welfare, a phenomenon that refers to processes of localisation or decentralisation describing the devolution of regulatory powers and responsibilities in the design and delivery of social policy programmes from the national to regional and local levels and as a consequence the emergence of new modes of institutional-territorial organisation and of multi-level governance (van Berkel and Borghi 2008, Lobao et al. 2009, Kazepow 2010, Künzel 2012, Andreotti et al. 2012). With respect to activation policies, Greffe (2003) highlights several reasons for decentralisation, most of them relating to challenges that are seen as requiring processes of policy making and delivery in proximity

to the contexts and actors involved, such as the multi-faceted nature of unemployment, the increasing volatility of the labour market in a globalized economy and hence the need for innovative solutions through local partnerships, the transformation from passive to active welfare states and the promotion of social inclusion in a broader sense. Sabatinelli (2010) discusses activation and rescaling processes as two interrelated phenomena in social policy development, both of them triggered by similar driving forces partly stemming from ongoing macro changes in all Western welfare states, but filtered and shaped by specific institutional and socio-economic characteristics of different national and local contexts. Sabatinelli discusses the emergence of activation policies in relation to different models of rescaling identifying different country clusters[16]. However, despite different framings and trajectories all cases show a strong emphasis on the local level, which is, „in fact, undeniably of major relevance when analysing activation policies because its essence lies in in-kind services: counselling, (re)training, protected working experiences. In this sense we can say that the emphasis on activation has been a main driving force for the decentralisation of policy responsibilities, as activation requires the involvement of lower, sub-national territorial levels." (Sabatinelli 2010: 102). Furthermore, the collaboration of different local actors becomes a crucial element in the implementation of activation policies, which hence require also the development of horizontal governance arrangements between local authorities and third-sector organisations and private providers of services. In this sense, the field of activation is a prime example for what has been described as the subsidiarisation of social policies (Kazepow 2008, 2010) in both its directions, i.e.vertically as the territorial reorganisation of regulatory powers, and horizontally as the multiplication of actors involved in policy making and delivery. But the significance of rescaling and decentralisation processes goes beyond the one of a mere organisational principle of policy making and delivery and it must be contextualized within a wider larger picture of societal and political transformation. Borghi and van Berkel (2007) discuss key characteristics of the new modes of governance in activation in relation to the notion of publicness[17] pointing out that

[16] For different paths in relation to the decentralization and centralization of activation for social assistance recipients in Europe see, e.g., also Minas et al. 2012.

[17] They assume that "publicness depends much more on the properties characterizing the actions of a plurality of (public and private) agencies and on the qualities and the aims of their relationships than on the a priori supposed nature of the agenicies themselves. This perspective, in which publicness has to do with the the process of treating a matter rather than with the actors involved, is rooted in a specific conception of the public spehere, the public good and of public social services." (Borghi and van Berkel 2007: 358).
Similarly, also Newman and Clarke (2009) discuss public services as a medium for publicness. Clarke and Newman argue, that "public services can – under some conditions – act as a focus for the formation of public imagineries and collective identities, and help sustain solidaristic attachments.

decentralisation "can mean very different things dependent on the national institutional framework; but, in general the range of possible (intended and unintended) consequences, as far as issues of publicness are concerned, can vary from increased visibility (e.g. decision making processes are closer to the citizens), to a gradual weakening of the universalistic claim of publicness and an intensification of the territorial fragmentation of rights." (Borghi and van Berkel 2007 : 358).

2.3.2. Marketisation and competition

The multiplication of actors in service delivery relates to the second main feature of provision models of activation services highlighted by van Berkel and Borghi (2008), namely marketisation and competition. The trend to divide up between the role of service purchaser and service provider has been accompanied by the introduction of marketisation and competition in the provision of activation services (while measures of income support normally remain a public responsibility). The underlying assumptions of this trend are well known. Promoting competition is expected to have positive impacts on the efficiency and effectiveness of services, on their flexibility, responsiveness, quality and last but not least on their price (Fay 1997, Sol and Westerveld 2005, Bredgaard and Larsen 2007, 2008). Bredgaard and Larsen (2007, 2008) analyse the implications of the contracting out of public employment services.[18] The starting point of their analysis is given by the remarkably frequent "division of labour" in the research field between the analysis of changes in public administration and the analysis of substantial changes in employment policies. Bredgaard and Larsen challenge the domination of "technical" discourses on management reforms which tend to neglect their consequences for policy content by analysing what happens in terms of substantial changes in public employment policies when they are contracted out to

(…) This means that public services are not only public because of their material basis in public funding or being located in a public sector. They are both constituted by, and constitutive of, notions of publicness. They are constituted because of their association with a particular set of 'public' discourses and cultural resources; and they are constitutive through the ways in which publicness is constantly being remade through the practices of public service work and technologies of public governance. There is an importanat argument about the diminution or erasure of the publicness of public services resulting from the introduction of markets, contracts and a consumerist focus. It is often asserted that, without collective solidarities, it is impossible to have state-funded welfare delivered through public institutions. We want to turn this on the head, arguing that collective provision and public institutions can help constitute collective belongings through the relationships and identifications they foster." (Newman and Clarke 2009: 4).

[18] Their research compares experiences from Holland, Australia and Denmark. Across the countries taken into account, the official political intention has been to make the much criticised Public Employment Services cheaper and better by tendering (primarily) for-profit providers in the delivery of employment services (Bredgaard and Larsen 2007, 2008).

non-public agencies. Bredgaard and Larsen ask if quasi-markets[19] in employment policy do deliver on the promises of improved efficiency, improved quality and de-bureaucratisation, what implications the new public management inspired contracting out of this kind of services has for political governance and regulation and, finally, which are the impacts of contracting out on policy content. Despite the differences encountered in the countries taken into account, Bredgaard and Larsen point out common difficulties of shifting to quasi-markets in employment policy. The aim to set up a market structure with easy access and exit through transparent and objective tendering criteria has turned out problematic and difficult to realise in practice. Their findings show that there is a trend towards a concentration of fewer but larger providers as well as towards increased public regulation over time. Furthermore, the process of market creation with ongoing tendering rounds as well as monitoring and supervision creates substantial transactions costs for the public sector. There are clear indications that the freer the market the higher the transaction costs, which means that, eventually, it is difficult to conclude whether the contracting out actually brings about better and cheaper services. In fact, the research of Bredgaard and Larsen disproves the great expectations that contracting out would lead to more innovative methods and to more responsive services. "Rather than developing new methods and innovating services, service providers fight to survive in the market, and are reluctant to take risks unless the outcome is considered certain." (Bredgaard and Larsen 2008: 350). This means that in the end, involvement of employers and networks remains weak and that contracting out is accompanied by a strong supply side orientation and, thus, work-first approaches. Eventually, even if the relationship between services user and provider turns into a costumer-business relation, free user choice can hardly be applied and effects of "creaming and parking" are almost unavoidable within a framework of market economic logic (Bredgaard and Larsen 2007, 2008). With regard to the implications for political governance and regulation, the contracting out of services, processes of market creation and the subsequent increasing needs for control and regulation, profoundly change the governance of employment policy, but as Bredgaard and Larsen point out, "(i)t is evident, that changing the public governance of employment policy from implementation based on public and bureaucratic management principles to implementation through market- and competition-based non-public agents is anything but a simple administrative exercise. Employment

[19] The theory of quasi-markets higlights at least three ways so called quasi-markets differ from conventional markets. In quasi markets not all providers are privately owned or aim at maximising profits, demand in the market is often public and not private and the choice of provider is often delegated to a third party, the service purchaser (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993).

policy is a field where service provision will always be subject to political demands: demands that can be difficult to meet when relying on indirect, incentive-based management of non-public agents. Paradoxically, there are indications that such an approach results in attempts to manage non-public agents in a more traditional bureaucratic way through increasing direct public regulation" (Bredgaard and Larsen 2007: 293). Finally, Bredgaard and Larsen show what impact contracting out has on the substance of employment policy and why it might be even a useful strategy in deliberately promoting work first approaches. As already pointed out, the ultimate focus of providers in a market framework is the quickest route to (re-)employment, which means that they invest mainly in the most promising target groups, that they have a limited focus on improving formal qualifications and that there is a higher risk of further "passivation" or increased "parking" of the weaker unemployed. But as a matter of fact, the predominance of a technical-rational discussion which hardly touches questions concerning substantial policy, fails to grasp how public matters, and eventually people, are treated (Borghi and van Berkel 2007) and makes (and even secures ?) that "(f)ar-reaching policy changes become politically invisible and de-politicised" (Bredgaard and Larsen 2007: 288). In a similar way, Davies (2008) challenges the idea that either the private or the third sector has a consistently better record in the provision of employment services. As Davies shows, in the enthusiasm for reform in British employment policy and in this context, in particular for the third sector, it is claimed that especially third sector organizations are not only more efficient and innovative, but that they bring additional benefits related to their advocacy role, their influence on policy development and their ability for democratic engagement and strengthening civil society. According to Davies these different roles of the third sector do create tensions in relation to the contracting out and the provision of employment services and in fact, he shows that in the UK the evidence for superior performance also of the third sector in employment service provision is rather thin (Davies 2008)[20]. In this context, and especially concerning the main focus of this work, it's worth to underline, with Hasluck and Green (2007), that "(t)here is little evidence that the nature of the provider of services (…) has a systematic impact on effectiveness. What does appear to be important is the quality, enthusiasm, motivation and commitment of the staff providing the service" (Hasluck and Green 2007: 145). Surprisingly, the latter aspect is yet rather marginal in the debate about the provision of activation services.

[20] For the German case see, for example, Bernhard and Wolff 2008 and Krug and Stephan 2011. For a general overview and recommendations for the Italian case see also Sartori 2013.

2.3.3. Interagency cooperation and integration of services

As a third main feature of activation service provision models van Berkel and Borghi highlight interagency cooperation and integration of services targeted at unemployed people. As is pointed out, "(c)ooperation between benefit and employment service agencies – especially in countries where employment services and benefit administration are, or used to be delivered by separate agencies – is considered to be a logical consequence of the activation of income protection systems, as it fits with the aim to develop benefits into springboards towards labour market-participation, to prioritise work before income and to make benefit entitlements conditional upon participation in activation" (van Berkel and Borghi 2008: 337). Lindsay and McQuaid (2008) highlight the increasing prominence of new forms of interagency cooperation in the development and delivery of activation strategies. The results of their case study research in different EU member states confirm a shared focus on local collaboration and the inclusion of different delivery agents. These strategies are in line with the recommendations of of the European Employment Strategy - which emphasises local partnerships and collaboration as a means of responsive activation services arguing at the same time for a progressive demonopolisation of the realm once dominated by Public Employment Services (Weishaupt 2010a) - and, more generally, with the increasing importance of the concept of (local) partnerships in the canon of public policy (Larner and Butler 2005, Kazepow 2010, Andreotti et al. 2012). As Lindsay and McQuaid point out, the notion of local partnerships encapsulates both forms of systemic coordination, i.e. multiagency governance based on institutionalized joint-working, and principal-agent relations, which may also include tendering models for the contracting out of services. The expected benefits of effective interagency cooperation and local partnerships are summed up in six key benefits. The first one, local flexibility and responsiveness, suggests that – given the complexity and the local sensitivity of labour market and social exclusion processes – multi-agency approaches grounded in the context of local labour markets can facilitate the tailoring of interventions to specific local circumstances. The second one, the sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources, emphasizes the bringing together of different stakeholders with their different forms of knowledge, expertise and resources as a means of developing targeted solutions for disadvantaged areas or groups. As a third key benefit, synergies available form partnership approaches and cooperation should improve the overall efficiency, not least due to better communication, smoother service interaction and the avoidance of gratuitous duplications. Another key benefit is seen in the developing of joint

services. Strategic partnerships are expected to achieve coherent and integrated approaches and, thus, service environments. The collaboration between agencies should result in better aligned service offers and convenient "one-stop-shops" for service users. Furthermore, multi-agency partnerships and collaborations are expected to build community capacity. The local collaboration between public agencies and community organizations should engender a sense of shared ownership and offer new opportunities to practical impacts on the policy agenda. Last but not least, local partnerships and collaborations are expected to provide better legitimisation and stakeholders more likely to "buy in" and to commit themselves to making interventions work. But as Lindsay and McQuaid also point out, there are possible limits to the extent to which models of interagency cooperation on activation can deliver these benefits. Effective interagency cooperation can be undermined by the rigidity of institutional and policy structures on the one side, on the other one community organizations can also find their independence undermined and hence endangered in their very potential. Finally, where multiagency solutions are based on contracting out, the possible benfits might be undermined also by problems of transactions costs and the subordination of quality to financial concerns. On the basis of their comparative anlysis of the experiences in three vanguard "active" welfare states, Lindsay and McQuaid show that "effective inter-agency cooperation in the governance and delivery of activation remains most likely within partnerships where strong PES organisations retain a key role in the management and (if appropriate) delivery of services, but are also empowered to share resources and decision-making authority with other stakeholders" (Lindsay and McQuaid 2008: 364). Champion and Bonoli (2011) look at institutional fragmentation and coordination initiatives in western European welfare states. They underline that within the reorientation of welfare states towards activation, the internal fragmentation of social security systems has emerged as a key policy problem. Coordination initiatives, understood as any reforms of the administration and delivery of benefits and services aimed at tackling this fragmentation, may be more or less far reaching ranging from collaboration guidelines or partnership work without reorganisation of the system over the introduction of "one-stop-shop" models to the outright merger of agencies. Champion and Bonoli analyse coordination initiatives in different countries in reference both to their intensity and inclusiveness and try to explain them as dependent phenomenon by applying different approaches from political sciences theory. Their purpose is to enhance an explanatory perspective on the more hidden and obscure side of policy reforms, namely the side of operational policy which is likely to go unnoticed for a majority of voters but which cannot, as already pointed out, be disentangled

from substantive changes in welfare policies. Genova (2008) also highlights that the redefinition of welfare policies concerns not only their formal aims and objectives, but also their service organisation structure. Within the general tendency to break down barriers between different areas of welfare policy all EU welfare systems have increasingly stressed the integration between labour market and social assistance policies and, thus, also on the integration of the correspondent services as a main issue in activation policies. Genova looks at the background of the integration rhetoric pointig out that the emphasis on linking labour market and social assistance policies has been framed by three main aspects: firstly by the strong focus on activation policies as part of the dominant neo-liberal political outlook, secondly by the prominent role of activation policies in the EU welfare model and, last but not least, by the rescaling of regulative authorities in activation policies. Against this background it turns out that also the feature of interagency cooperation and service integration is not just a question of better or more efficient organisation of services but that it also stands for certain policy goals and developments which have to be increasingly managed at local level.

2.3.4. Management ideas matter

In summary, it has to be stressed that these main features of activation services and generally the processes related to the governance of activation, such as rescaling, marketisation, contracting out, interagency cooperation, are not mere organisational aspects, but that they are linked to and determine also the content, the substantial dimension of what activation policies turn out to be and to mean in practice. In this sense, issues and ideas about governance, administration and management have to be better taken into account in order to grasp their impact in shaping policies and translating them into practice, even more as they tend to be more unnoticed and hidden on the operational side and in an apparently "aseptic" management talk. Weishaupt (2010b) points out that the common turn to activation has generated a large body of literature assessing substantial aspects of national instruments and programmes, while much less is known about the governance of activation policy even if administration and implementation of welfare policies contribute to the very nature of welfare states, affect the relationship between citizens and the state and determine the effectiveness of policy delivery. This gap is even more suprising in the case of activation policies with their emphasis on programmes and services aimed at promoting the employability and labour market participation and at playing a key role in reducing welfare

dependency and making welfare states more activating. Weishaupt argues that governance of Public Employment Services, government's most important arms in delivering activation policies, has been fundamentally changed by the spread of New Public Management ideas. This "silent revolution" through the discovery and spread of NPM ideas, first emerged in the UK and Sweden and subsequently diffused through international organizations such as the OECD and the EU and internalized by critical epistemic communities, has lead to the "consolidation of a common template, defining what a modern PES ought to look like" (Weishaupt 2010b: 480) which has been adopted by different countries regardless of governments' party composition or welfare regime type. As Weishaupt points out, core trajectories include "a common focus on performance, quality and case management as well as contestability in service delivery and the reinforcement of the *collaboration* between, if not *merger* of agencies proving care PES functions" (Weishaupt 2010b: 480). However, these convergent trajectories with respect to the governance of PES remain contingent on historical legacies and cultural predispositions as well as on political actors interpretations of problems and constitutional limitations. Anyway, Weishaupt's contribution highlights the more silent, but very important role of prevailing management ideas and their diffusion by critical epistemic communities to keep activation regimes in flux and to spur the convergence of their governance structures (Weishaupt 2010a,b).

2.3.5. Different dynamics at stake

To recognize that the operational side of policy cannot be completely separated out from the substantial dimension of policy content is an important prerequisite to understand that policy making has to do also with governance and goes on during processes of implementation and delivery. But speaking about governance of activation in a general way and pointing out its main features might risk to conflate in a few general concepts very different dynamics and to lose sight of the multiple tensions and the changing configurations in terms of power and authority both between institutions and between individuals and institutions. As Newman (2007) states „activation forms a condensate through which contemporary governance trends can be analysed, and the literature has highlighted the importance of processes of decentralisation, individualisation, personalisation, contractualisation, marketisation, together with the emergence of network based and collaborative forms of governance. However, the problem of viewing activation as a condensate – a single lens through which different trends and tendencies can be brought into

view – is that this may collapse important differences in the forms of power and authority that are deployed and mask potential tensions arising from their dynamic interaction in specific sites.“ (Newman 2007: 364). Newman critically asks how far general concepts can be applied to institutional change as well as to changing relationships between service organisations and their clients and points out that the collapse of questions of governance and policy in apparently similar concepts may be suggestive in describing general trends, but counterproductive in grasping different dynamics at stake in the interaction between policy and governance. In this sense she unpacks the central concepts of privatisation, individualisation and contractualisation, „rather slippery concepts“ (Newman 2007: 365) usually applied both to the content of policy and the ways of its implementation. With regard to privatisation, Newman points out that the debate on privatisation is represented by the state versus market distinction, providing one certain way of understanding the concept, namely the shift towards the privatisation of public goods and services, but obscuring the very different meanings of the private. The state versus market representation of public and private, not only tends to omit gender and familial relationships, as feminist critiques have shown (Daly 2000, Lewis 1992, 2002, Sainsbury 1994, 1996, 1999), but by referring to the private as markets, governed by the principle of demand and supply and coordinated by impersonal exchanges, it obscures the meaning of the private as the private realms of family, household and community. Furthermore it neglects the meaning of the private as the personal, as sense of identity and personal values and relationships. Unpacking the concept of privatisation in relation to the different meanings of private, Newman spells out that privatisation is not only about the privatisation of service delivery, but that privatisation as privatisation of social risks might come along with processes of informalisation and familialisation of welfare as well as with new forms of governmental power, „in which the personal becomes both an object (of new strategies) and a resource (to be mobilised in the process of constituting new forms of self governing welfare subjects).“ (Newman 2007: 366). Similarly, the personal tends to be conflated with the concept of individualisation, the latter referring to strategies and practices of service delivery based on the idea that services need to be flexible, tailor made, responsive to individual circumstances. But as Newman points out, the concept of individualisation as ideal of service delivery differs in subtle ways from personalisation as a governmental strategy. In the context of personalisation as a governmental strategy, “activation measures can be understood as opening up more of the person to governmental power, requiring them to collaborate in the development of new subjective orientations to the worlds of work and welfare“ (Newman 2007: 366). Keeping

apart individualisation as ideal for service delivery and personalisation as a governmental strategy allows to grasp the different dynamics of what has been labeled as „making it personal“ (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007) and their implications beyond the mere question of how activation services should be delivered. However, introducing the Foucauldian concept of governmentality[21] as „conduct of the conduct“ (Foucault 1991), Newman also refers to the interrelatedness and the mutual reinforcement of individualised service delivery and personalisation as governmental strategy in practice. In this sense, the individual relationship between client and case worker allows for new forms of governmentality „associated with the installation of new subject positions and normative orientations“ (Newman 2007: 366). With regard to the concept of contractualisation, Newman's argumentation concerns the conflation of different forms of contracts, institutional contracts between purchasers and providers and individualised contracts between services and citizens, as well as the different characters of administrative versus social contracts in relation to their focus on the personal. According to Newman, the social contract of activation „invokes new forms of governmentality that are based to the inculcation of new forms of governable subject, subjects in which the person – his or her ‚inner will' – becomes a resource enabling the transformation of welfare states through the transformation of obligations into commitments.“ (Newman 2007: 367). This critical approach not only shows the difficulties of condensing apparently similar concepts of contractualisation cutting across strategies of both institutional and personal governance, but it uncovers also the slipperiness of many of the ideas condensed in the activation debate, such as the empowerment of active citizens and their greater involvement in the realisation of policies and services. From a governmentality perspective these strategies might be seen as new disciplinary logics of rule opening up more of the person to governmental power, „for example in the process of ‚responsibilising' citizens, encouraging them to be ‚active' (but only in certain ways), and engaging them in partnership with the state in finding solutions to the problems of welfare after the welfare state.“ (Newman 2007: 367f).

This critical perspective challenges the idea of activation as an unambiguous concept to describe one precise trajectory of change and it explores different dynamics at stake in the governance of activation. Thus, it offers also a critical approach to look at activation in practice and to ask how these different dynamics interact differently in different situations

[21] The notion of governmentality derives from Foucault's work which points out the attempts to shape human behaviour and the governance of the self as techniques of the art of government in a broad and subtle sense (see. e.g. Dean 1999). A governmentality approach on frontline work in activation services is discussed more elaborately later on (2.4.2).

and in relation to different target groups. Such a more differentiated view on how the main features of activation can be applied to the governance of both institutions and persons and on the underlying configurations of power and authority might be essential for unerstanding frontline practice in activation services, as the very moment where the personal is encountered by these different dynamics at stake.

2.4. Frontline work matters.

As shown so far, legislation can describe social policy only partially and the substantial aspects of policy are inseparable from processes of governance and implementation, even more in the case of social policies that require the cooperation of different agencies and the delivery of services and which, thus, make lower-level discretion an intrinsic feature of the policy and its provision.

While the former paragraphs have dealt with issues of governance and key characteristics of activation service provision models in general, this paragraph is going to address more specifically the aspect of frontline work in activation services. Of course frontline work belongs to the organisational perspective van Berkel (2011) proposes as one important perspective for looking at the provision of activation services and the production of social citizenship. But in this context the aspect of frontline work shall be considered as going beyond a mere organisational question. It is understood that frontline practice has to be seen in its organisational context and that it is guided by rules and regulations given not only by legislation but also by organisational frameworks. However, frontline workers have also to be seen as agents determing the enactment of policies and, as such, as being part of the policy making community. Their job is the implementation of policy and its translation into practices. At the same time, frontline workers dispose also of discretional spaces they need in order to „getting the job done“ and hence at least of some margins of autonomy. Additionally, they have probably also their own attitudes and opinions in respect of policy goals (maybe determined also by their very personal background of biography, personality and feelings), their own understandings and interpretations of what they are doing and of which the most important or meaningful aspects of their work are. Last but not least, it has to be taken into account that they are the interface between the policy and its target groups, often representing the only person-to-person contact the majority of service users have with employment and/or welfare services. This means that they are exposed to the real frontline,

where the delivery of activation policies with their different dynamics at stake encounter the personal and meet with people's needs, expectations and ideas. Thus, the enactment of activation policies and their translation into practice occurs through this encounter between frontline workers and service users, which might also be determining at least to some extent their outcomes, or as Meyers et al. (1998: 2f) put it: „(s)ocial policies as enacted reflect the actions (and strategic nonactions) of implementing agents that are likely to produce (or fail to produce) behavioral and other outcomes consistent with the objectives of policymaking principals."

This perspective is even more important as one of the core featurs of the provision of activation services is the phenomenon of individualisation.[22] As it has been already pointed out, in very general terms individualisation in service provison means that services should be adjusted to individal circumstances to increase their effectiveness, that ‚one-size-fits-all' approaches should be replaced by individualised or tailor-made ways of service provision. Van Berkel and Valkenburg (2007) discuss the phenomenon of individualisation against the background of the turn towards ‚active' welfare states and new forms of governance. They point out different motives for and legitimations of individualisaton and show that this tendency of „making it personal" is far from being clear and unambiguous.

First, the individualisation of service provisions is intended to cope with the heterogeneity of target groups in order to meet the diversity of needs and circumstances services are supposed to deal with and, thus, to produce effectivenes and efficiency gains. Individualising activation services should refer people only to programmes which fit their situation and consequently raise their motivation. But as van Berkel and Valkenburg underline, these expectations are not free from possible contradictions, as „(t)he actors involved – policy makers, programme providers, case managers, clients – may have different opinios on what effectiveness means, for example. In most cases, effectiveness is defined in terms of labour market entry; which does not necessarily have to coincide with the ambitions and wishes of the clients. But even when it does, effectiveness can mean different things. Does it refer to sustainable employment? Does it refer to labour market inclusion in jobs that match the qualifications, skills, ambitions and wishes of the individual? Does it refer to placing people in a job as quickly as possible, irrespective of the sustainability or quality of the job?" (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007: 12).

[22] As the ‚tour d'horizon' on different notions and regimes of activation in chapter one has shown, a common feature consists precisely in the emphasis on individualised activation services as a core element of effective active labour market policies.

Another expectation is that the more individualised provision of activation services should strenghten citizens' individual repsonsibility, which figures considerably both in active welfare state discourses and in discourses on new forms of governance. In the active welfare state discourse individual responsibility is mainly referred to in order to underline „that it is first and foremost the unemployed individual who is responsible for preventing unemployment and realising self-sufficiency through labour market participation. Individualisation against this background means that the responsibilities, obligations and entitlements of the unemployed person are determined on an individual basis. Subsequently, the person's behaviour is supervised on a individual basis in order to monitor compliance; if aplicable the individual may be sanctioned or rewarded." (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007: 12). In the discourse on new forms of governance the notion of individual responsibility might have a rather different meaning as it is embedded in a debate which emphasises the competences of services users to determine their needs and to participate in the development of interventions able to meet them. In this debate, individual responsibility relates to the choice of services users - to the option of voice in a more participatory approach or at least to the option of exit in a more consumerist perspective – in order to increase the responsiveness of services, to promote the competition between providers and to put the „customer" in charge in the service provision process (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007).

Last but not least, as it has been already discussed in chapter one, the activation turn has also been a response to an increasing pressures on welfare states and „(t)he process of individualization mirrors the attempt to modernize the welfare state in the midst of growing ideological and financial constraints, creating flexible services in which political recognition of late modern societies' heterogeneity and differentiation converge with the economic imperative of efficiency." (Maron 2014: 88). In this sense, reducing welfare state expenditure is also a motive which might be related to a more individualised provision of services. Increased effectivness and efficiency are expected to produce also favourable fiscal effects, not least by a more targeted application of resources and the promotion of welfare independence. But the strong focus on individualised service provision might also „strenghten the gatekeeper function of social security systems, increase selectivity and promote fraud prevention as it generally increases the opportunities for behaviour surveillance, and introduces new ways of defining and distinguishing ‚deserving' from ‚non-deserving' clients" (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007: 13).

These different remarks reveal, that within the shift towards activation with its strong focus on individualisation the dimension of service provision and, thus, frontline work have

gained in importance. At the same time it turns out, that the notion of individualisation is far from being a clear and unambiguos phenomenon. On the contrary, it enfolds a variety of different and even contradictory dynamics which must be unravelled in order to understand the role of services in general and of frontline workers in particular as well as the tensions and contradictions they have to face in their daily practice. As it has been already argued, implementation processes are crucial in shaping the nature and content of policy delivery, especially in the domain of human services. As Hasenfeld (1983) points out in his seminal work, implementation in human services is further complicated as policy principles also depend on the frontline staff as well as on clients who are both the target and the final agents in the policy implementation chain. In this sense, policy outcomes are lastly jointly produced through transactions between frontline workers of services and their clients. Understandably, activation services with their more or less explicit aim to influence the conduct of their target groups (van Berkel 2010) can never be fully standardized but they need even more this face-to-face encounter between frontline workers and clients as well as conditions which allow these joint production of „activation outcomes". In this sense, „activation work" (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012) on the frontline of services is an integral part and a crucial aspect of activation strategies and caseworkers play an increasingly important role in shaping the policy outcomes of the welfare state.

Different scholars have addressed the impact and consequences the shift towards activation has had not only for service users but also for service staff involved in delivering and providing activation services suggesting a paradigmatic shift also in the way frontline work has to be approached and carried out in practice. Lurie (2001) analysed the changing functions of frontline staff in the context of the implemantation of the TANF programme in the United States as shifting from impersonal clerical functions related to determining eligibility and benefits to the engagement in more personalized intervention strategies adressing the lives, behaviours, and financial problems of clients. Meyers et al. (1998) point out that the shift from income protection to activation implied also a shift in the social technologies on which the interactions between frontline workers and clients are founded.[23]

[23] Their study analysed the implementation of Work Pays policies in local welfare agencies in California focussing in particular on the face-to-face transactions between welfare workers and their clients. Work Pays was designed to promote work over welfare and self-sufficiency over welfare dependence, as it was stated by the California Department of Social Services in a communication to frontline staff: „These changes are complicated, and can make your job more difficult. Fortunately, one aspect of the program has become easier to understand: *it always pays to work*... It's an important message, and it's one we hope you will help us deliver. You are a vital link to the AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children, U. N.) population and we can't hope to reach recipients without your support." (cited from Meyers et al. 1998: 6, emphasis in the original).

Wheras income protection programmes required „people sustaining“ activities primarily designed to maintain clients' well-being, activation strategies require „people changing technologies“ designed to change the personal attributes, motivations and behaviours of clients. (Meyers et al. 1998). This shift in the role and in the prominence of frontline work in the context of activation strategies has gained in attention in the different reserach lines on activation. Maron (2014) distinguishes between a more structural-organisational and a more poststructural approach to the governance of activation. The first type engages with the governance of activation primarily from the perspectives of political economy as well as of institutional and organizational scholarship. This approach necessarily focuses on the processes of governance and implemantation as institutional and organisational issues. Frontline work is framed, however, mainly within an organisational approach tending to disregard the agency of micro-level participants and the challenges of practice. A more critical research line is rooted in the poststructural tradition of Foucault drawing on a governmentality approach on activation to investigate the micro-level reproductions of subjectivities in activation regimes. The challenge might be, however, to combine these different approaches and to look at frontline work from different perspectives in order to debunk what is going on in practice. Of course frontline work has to be contextualised within policy strategies and institutional and organisational contexts with their different dynamics of governance. In this sense, frontline work is part of policy delivery but it has to be conceived also as an active part of policy making which means that the enactment of activation policies depends also on what frontline workers are doing and thinking and on how they move in ambiguous domains. The question what frontline workers are doing calls necessarily upon questions concerning the issues of discretion and autonomy. How much discretion do and should frontline workers have, how much discretion and autonomy is needed to getting the job done in practice? And how are frontline workers seen in the policy chain? As reluctant partners whose cooperation is uncertain and difficult to achieve (Stoker 1991) and who have, thus, to be strictly aligned and controlled in the adminsitrative apparatus, or as reflexive practitioners who need to have discretion and professional autonomy in order to best serve the service users? What use of discretion and autonomy do frontline workers make against the background of different „welfare cultures“ understood as knowledge, ideas and values which sorround and inform and either justify or oppose welfare-state interventions (Pfau-Effinger 2005) as well as on the basis of their very own opinions? Acknowleding the agency of frontliners as contextualised actors and their meaning making in and of their daily work, means also to understand which kinds of relationship with

their clients they prefer over others, which solutions they privilege among different possibilties and maybe also how they engage in „defining ‚privileged subjects' that they claim deserve the benefits of organized social welfare, counterposed to who do not" (Padamsee and Adams 2002: 190f). These different aspects of frontline work can be highlighted by different theoretical approaches. Thus, the following paragraphs focus on different theoretical perspectives in order to understand the different aspects of frontline work in activation services and to grasp the challenges frontliners have to face in practice. Although frontline work has increasingly been taken into account in research on activation in practice, questions regarding (professional) challenges in this field have remained rather marginal, at least so far. This might be due also to the fact that there is no consensus whether activation work should be understood and designed as a more administrative or a more professional activity even though social welfare (in different fields) is increasingly linked to the activation paradigm and although reserach findings suggest that a professionalisation in this field might be desirable also for the general effectiveness of activation services (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012).

2.4.1. The use of discretion: frontline work as street-level bureaucracy

The most prominent approach discussed and applied in this respect is doubtlessly Lipsky's street-level bureacucracy approach. Bringing together the perspective of individual behaviour in bureaucratic organisations with a policy implementation perspective, Lipsky's seminal work, first published in 1980, deals with the dilemmas of the individual in the paradoxical reality on the frontline of public services. The central claim of Lipsky's work is that the exercise of discretion is a critical dimension for public workers who regularly and directly interact with people in the course of their jobs, such as teachers, social workers or policy officers. At the same time, these jobs are hard to be performed according to high standards of decision-making processes because of structures of authority, sets of rules and the lack of resources necessary to respond properly to the individual „case", such as time and information. Thus, street-level bureaucrats have to manage their difficult jobs by developing routines of practice and by constructing and categorizing (which often means also psychologically simplifying) their clientele and environment in ways that also influence the outcomes of their jobs and efforts. Lipsky argues that the work of different and apparently unrelated frontline workers resemble each other structurally in the sense that all of them embody the same essential paradox, namely to be highly scripted in order to achieve policy

goals on the one hand, and to require, on the other one, constantly improvisation and responsiveness. This paradox crops out daily in the tension between treating all citizens alike in their claims on government and to be at the same time responsive and appropriate to the individual „case“ and, eventually, in the often perceived as double faced nature of these jobs. As Lipsky points out, the term of street-level bureaucracy itself hints at this fundamental paradox. „’Bureaucracy’ implies a set of rules and structures of authority; ‚street-level’ implies a distance from the center where authority presumably resides.“ (Lipsky 2010: xii). But Lipsky’s work goes beyond treating the problem of discretion as a mere organisational issue in public services. The important contribution of Lipsky’s approach is that he highlights how the use of discretion by street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, the devices and strategies they apply in order to cope with work pressures and uncertainties and the decisions the eventually make, effectively become the public policies they have to carry out in practice. In this sense, Lipsky’s approach underpins the argumentation carried out here, that the attempt to understand the impact of policies has to go beyond formal policy and to see what is going on in practice, or as Lipsky puts it: „(P)ublic policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators. These decision-making arenas are important, of course but they do not represent the complete picture. To the mix of places where policies are made, one must add the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers. Further (...) policy conflict is not only expressed as the contention of interest groups, as we have come to expect. It os also located in the struggles between individual workers and citizens who challenge or submit to client-processing.“ (Lipsky 2010: xiii).

Lipsky’s approach offers a highly articulated and illuminating insight into the dilemmas street level-bureaucrats encounter and into their critical role as policy makers. Lipsky also analyses working conditions and the problem of goals and performance measurement of street-level bureaucrats, their relations with clients in the tension between human interaction and bureaucratic systems and their critical role also for the rationing of services. But as already pointed out, Lipsky doesn’t discuss these issues only as organisational or implementation problems, but with a strong concern to the role of street-level bureaucrats in the final shaping of policy at its encounter with the personal and the impacts of public services to people’s lives and opportunities and, eventually, to the dimension of citizenship itself. As Lipsky argues, „street level bureaucrats have considerable impact on peoples’ lives. This impact may be of several kinds. They socialize citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community. They determine

the eligibility of citizens for government benefits and sanctions. They oversee the treatment (the service) citizens receive in those programs. Thus, in a sense street-level bureaucrats implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state. In short, they hold a key dimension of citizenship." (Lipsky 2010: 4). This understanding underpins also Lipsky's analysis of the difficulties in the interaction with clients, which is not only determined by the balancing act between efforts in the personal interaction on the one hand, which imply responsiveness, on the spot decision making focused on the individual situation, but also managing the human encounter and the reactions of citizens, and the requirements of bureaucratic behaviour on the other one. The difficulties in the interactions with clients have to be seen also in the light of the fact that street-level bureaucrats essentially act as agents of social control. As Lipsky points out, public services often play an important role in softening the impacts of the economic system on those who are not its primary beneficiaries and in inducing service users to accept the neglect of primary economic and social institutions. In fact, with respect to programmes of public support to employment e.g., Lipsky states, „that they are designed and implemented to convey the message that welfare status is to be avoided and that work, however poorly rewarded, is preferable to public assistance." (Lipsky 2010: 11).[24] In this sense, in many public services street-level bureaucrats embody the very essential ambivalence in many forms of state intervention and as such they are also in the center (and often target) of public controversies. It's in this field of tension that street-level bureaucrats have to interact daily at the services' frontlines.

As Lipsky points out, street-level bureaucrats make policy in two related respects. First they exercise decisional discretion in the interaction with citizens. Then, taken in concert, their individual actions sum up to agency behaviour. However, the function of street-level bureaucrats as policy makers is built on two interrelated facets of their role, their degrees of discretion and their relative autonomy from organisational authority. According to Lipsky it is one common trait of street-level bureaucrats, even of those who cannot claim to a professional status,[25] that they exercise considerable discretion. Of course this is not to say that street-level bureaucrats are unrestrained by rules, regulations and directives from above. On the contrary, major dimensions of public policy, such as nature of services, categories of eligibility and levels of benefits, are shaped by policy elites and political and adminsitrative officials. However, Lipsky's argument is that beneath laws, rules and regulations, street level workers can and have to exercise discretion because certain characteristics of street-level

[24] Written at the beginning of the 80ies in the US, with the activation turn this idea has increasingly become prominent also in the context of European welfare states.

bureaucracy jobs make it rather impossible to completely reduce discretion. Street-level bureaucrats often work in complex situations that are too complicated to be reduced to programmatic formats and often require responses to the human dimensions of situations. But the necessity of discretion has not only to do with the nature of the tasks themselves. As Lipsky points out a certain degree of discretion might be also needed to promote workers' self-regard and to make clients believe that workers hold the key to their well-being. In this sense, the maintenance of discretion contributes also to the legitimacy of public policies and services, both in the workers' and in the clients' perspective. However, from a policy implementation perspective discretion in frontline work is needed to even allow the concretion of policy strategies in the moment of their encounter with the „real world", to make them work in practice. Herein also lies the reason that the handling of discretion in street-level organisations cannot than be ambivalent. Lipsky shows how organizations seek on the one hand to control frontliners through various forms of bureaucratic control but how they have, on the other one, to leave descretional spaces, even tacitly accepting possible distortions between official policy strategies and real solutions. This is not only due to the impossibility of total control over street-level bureaucrats but rather to the awareness that the implementation of policies needs discretional spaces for finding "real-world solutions to getting the job done" (Evans and Hardy 2010, p. 108).[26]

Such an understanding of discretion offers a highly relevant perspective for looking at activation policies with their emphasis on tailor-made services and individualisation. As Lorenz (2010) points out, social policies do not work automatically but their internal ambiguities allow (and need) considerable discretion in their implementation. Thus, it is increasingly important to focus on the relationship between policy development and practices of implementataion in order to critically analyze the role that discretionary agents, such as frontliners, assume within political strategies, even more as the shift towards activation - as Meyers et al. (1998) suggest - makes frontline work less administrative and

[26] Evans and Hard discuss different ideas on how practitioners should use their discretion to make policies work in practice (Evans and Hardy 2010). Some ideas underline the importance of understanding the ‚spirit' of policies and the need of a realistic political sense of practitioners to distinguish between core policy goals and less important or more flexible aspects of their implementation (see e.g. Sabatier 1993). An idea which is important from a professional point of view emphasizes the importance of professional ethics to guide those involved in ‚politics on the frontline'. According to this idea professionals do not stand outside the policies, but nontheless they should be free to make decisions oriented by their own professional ethics. In this sense, policies should not be realized through the strict adherence to rigid procedures, but their transformation into practice should be mediated by an ethically-oriented professionalism. Such a perspective shows the difference between a defensive practice that denies any possibility of discretion and a professional practice which claims areas of discretion in order to influence the implementation of policies on the basis of its professional mandate and values.

more focused on „people changing“ rather than administrative people processiong social technologies. In fact, the issue of discretion has emerged as a key issue in research on the reorganisation of public welfare provision and particularly in the context of activation policies and services. But as Jewell (2007) highlights in his comparative study on caseworkers in the US, Germany and Sweden, discretion is not an all or nothing issue and the discretion on the frontline of activation services depends on the approach to activation and on diversities in activation programmes. Generally speaking, it can be assumed that discretion increases when „individualized, tailor-made and deregulated rather then uniform, standardized and fully regulated activation processes are pursued“ (van Berkel 2011: 196f) and in this sense, the notion of discretion and its approach in the tradition of Lipsky is a valid reference point for a deeper understanding of activation in practice.

Another important aspect in Lipsky's work is his focus on the relations between street-level bureaucrats and their clients. As he points out clients in street-level bureaucracies are usually non voluntary, either because street-level bureaucracies provide essential services wich cannot be obtained elsewhere or, even if there is no public monopol, public services are nevertheless the only services available to the poor. The fact that street-level bureaucracies have mostly non-voluntary clients means that they are less dependent on or even indifferent to the loss of clients or client dissatisfaction. Sometimes street-level bureaucracies might even be rewarded for reducing their clientele and for being severe gatekeepers. Of course, the fact that often the majority of clients are nonvoluntary has significant implications not only for street-level bureaucracies as a whole but also for the relations and interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients. If clients cannot avoid or withdraw from the encounter with frontliners in public services, this has an impact to the nature of interaction and the costs the nonvoluntary person will sustain in the intercation become much higher. This aspect is an important element distinguishing the relationship between frontlineers and users in activation services, designed, after all, to make „an offer you can't refuse“, as Lødemel and Tricky (2001) put it so aptly as title of their seminal work on workfare in international perspective.

But depicting the relation between frontliners and clients in street-level bureacucracies as a neat black and white issue with the powerful part on the one side and the unvoluntary, controlled and disciplined part on the other one means oversimplyfing its more complex nature. Of course, it is important to underline the asymmetric essence of the relationship and frontliners' function of control and disciplinary power. At the same time, it is importnat to recognize, that street-level bureaucrats themselves are not free from

constraints and different forms of control. They are usually pressed with heavy case loads and the demand for quick decision making in situations of little time and information. Furthermore they are guided by bureaucratic (and professional?) standards of fairness but also by social norms of proper behaviour towards other people and by the recognition that power should be accpompanied by responsibility, particularly when clients are identified as vulnerable or in need. This is not to say that street-level bureauctars are immune against abusing their positions, but it underlines that street-level work has to be understood as the mobilization of control in combination with constraints against excessive manifestations of power, a combination which overall is of crucial importance for the public legitimacy of street-level bureaucracies. Last but not least, it should be highlighted that street-level bureaucrats are also guided by their own ideals and and their commitment to serving the community and people in need, as Lipsky himself argues. In this sense, successful intervention, expressions of gratitude and changes in behaviour in the desired directions are very often meaningful elements to street-level bureaucrats, even though such developments are not always (only) attributable to their work, which remains constrained by the intrinsic and extrinsic limits of the jobs they are doing.

Against this background, a very important mechanism which has to be pointed out in order to grasp the nature of street-level practice ist the process of the social construction of clients. As Lipsky points out - and as it shoud be recognised in accordance to the leading principle of individualisation in activation services - people come to street-level bureaucraicies as unique individuals living in different circumstances and situations and having different personalities, experiences, needs and expectations. However, „(i)n their encounters with bureaucracies they are transformed into clients, indentifiably located in a very small number of categories, treated as if, and treating themselves as if, they fit standardized definitions of units consigned to specific bureaucratic slots. The processing of *people* into *clients*, assigning them to categories for treatment by bureaucrats, and treating them in terms of those categories, is a social process.“ (Lipsky 2010: 59). However, there might be little agreement on the picture of „reality“ provided by such constructions, as street-level bureaucrats and clients are, according to Lipsky, „intrinsically in conflict over objectives and the relationship is drastically unequal. What street-level bureaucrats think they do may have little connection with what clients think is going on. Clients tend to experience their needs as individual problems and their demands as individual expressions of expectations and grievances. They often expect treatment appropriate to them as individuals, and are in large measure encouraged in this expectation by public institutions and society in

general. On the other hand, street level bureaucrats experience client problems as calls for categories of action: individual client demands are perceived as components of aggregats. Expectations of proper treatment are framed in terms of satisfactory solutions for the optimal processing of the totality of the work rather than in terms of the best solutions for the individual cases.“ (Lipsky 2010: 60). Thus, the construction of clients has to be seen as part of the strategies by which street-level bureacucrats seek control over the process of service provision. In this sense the different dimensions of control in street-level bureaucracies and the ways it is exercised determine the ways clients are „constructed“ and „seen“ and viceversa. Street-level bureaucrats can exercise control through the distribution of benefits and sanctions and the strategies and manouevres adopted for their allocation can be seen as being part of constructiong client profiles. Furthermore, street-level bureaucrats also structure the context of the interaction with clients by determining when, how often and under which circumstances intercation takes place and they teach the client role, by telling clients what is expected from them and what they can expect if they behave properly. As the encounter between street-level bureaucrat and clients is the encounter with authority but in the shape of human interaction, it may have also have psychological implications. In this sense, the way citizens are treated by street-level bureaucrats as symbols of authority may also impact on their view of themselves.

In a nutshell, Lipsky shows that delivering street-level policy through bureaucracy means to embrace a contradiction. „On the one hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring and responsibility. On the other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resource limitations and constraints, making care and responsibility conditional.“ (Lipsky 2010: 71). The need to embrace this contradiction in person is the main feature of frontline work in street-level bureaucracies and it creates the field of tension wherein street-level bureaucrats have to find their role and a way to do their job. Lipsky describes how street-level bureaucrats are on the one hand expected to be advocates and to use their knowledge, skills and position in the best interest of their clients while on the other one they have to work under alienating conditions of bureaucracy.

But this contradiction has not to be seen only as inevitable, on the contrary Lipsky’s point is that exactly this contradiction and the discretion street-level bureaucrats must have in their jobs are needed for the implementation of policy goals under circumstances of limited resouces. Discretion in frontline work exactly arises from the need to turn policy goals into practice, to decide how to use the limited resources to reach those goals and, last

but not least, to bring policy to its target groups through personal encounter and human interaction (and thus to give a human face to authority and bureaucracy). Lispky developed his approach during the 1970s in the context of urban politics in North America and his approach reflects both his disciplinary perspective and his fields of interest. However, during the last years there has been renewed interets in Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy perspective (Evans 2010). This is not a case, but it has to be seen against the background of paradigmatic shifts in conceptualising state intervention and in the context of policies which highlight multi-level governance and individualisation in service provision and, hence, need higher discretion on lower levels.

However, the notion of discretion is to some extent discussed differently in debates on policy implementation (Lipsky 1993) and in debates on professional practice (Evans and Harris 2004, Evans 2010). As Evans (2010) points out the notion of discretion has reemerged in social work debates in the face of an intensification of managerialism in the public sector and is discussed as a concept that encapsulates the tension between increased regulation of and the need for initiative and creativity in professional practice. From a social work perspective one of the critiques of Lipsky's approach has been that it does not distinguish explicitly between street-level bureaucrats in general and professionals in a stricter sense. Although Lipsky himself speaks often about ‚professionals' and refers to professions such as social workers, teachers, doctors or lawyers, his approach is general in the sense that it emphasizes the common characteristics of frontline practitioners and their use of discretion in public services. However, studies that have adopted Lipsky's approach show the major discretional spaces of professionals in a stricter sense and the importance of an ethical obligation in professional discretion (Kelly 1994, Evetts 2006, Evans 2010, Evans 2011). Another critique questioned the applicability of Lipsky's approach in the context of social services, arguing that discretional spaces of social workers were replaced and suppressed by a managerialist culture (Howe 1986, 1996). However, there is evidence that despite an increasing managerial culture social workers do still have spaces of discretion which elude managerial control (Baldwin 2004, Evans and Harris 2004, Taylor and Kelly 2006, Evans 2010, 2011). Evans (2010) offers a detailled framework for the analysis of discretion in welfare services challenging the idea of discretion as worker freedom which has to be controlled or tends even to be disestablished by management control. As Evans shows managers' and practitioners' interests are not necessarily at odds and the issue of discretion has to be approached in a more nuanced way, which looks at different factors configuring discretion in particular ways in particular settings. In this sense, discretion is discussed not

only in relation to the single frontline practitioner as discretionary agent, but discretion is rather discussed as the result of shared ideas about policy and practice, of collusive action to challenge or subvert aspects of policy which are seen as running counter to shared commitments and of continuing discourses within welfare services (Evans 2010). This more nuanced approach to discretion is suitable for bringing together a professional perspective with a policy implementation perspective which conceives discretion in frontline work not only as possible distortion but which acknowledges that discretion is needed for the translation of policy goals in practice and which, at its best, appreciates frontline practice as site for a reflexive encounter and discursive decision making. However, regardless of how discretion is conceived, eventually frontline practitioners in public services dispose of more or less discretion and, as Maynard Moody and Musheno (2003) have shown, they confront the rules of their jobs in relation to their own beliefs about the people they encounter creating their own views about their work and their (more or less open) ways of doing it. Thus, independently on how discretion is dealt with in policy implementation and in organisational settings, frontline practitioners continue to be important discretionary agents and their point of view is one important dimension to understand how the translation of policies into practices eventually passes off. Thus, Lipsky's approach offers a still valid framework to study the practice of activation, both as a lense for empirical analysis and further theoretical advancements[27]. Eventually, going back to a close reading of Lispky's insightful analysis of the dilemmas the individual encounters in public services is also an important reference which offers various contact points for bringing together (or at least closer) a more policy implementation oriented perspective with a perspective asking for (professional) challenges in "activation work" and for the ways frontliners can do and persist in their difficult job.

2.4.2. Governing people: frontline work as authority and power *in situ*

However, beside the street-level bureaucracy approach there are other important theoretical perspectives which have to be taken into account in looking at frontline work in activation services. One important reference point has to be located in the debate grounded in the poststructural approach of Foucaludian thinking and often labelled as Post-Foucauldian governmentality in looking critically on different aspects of social policy (McKee 2009). A governmentality perspective has gained increasing popularity within social

[27] See e.g. Rice (2013) who brings together Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach with institutionalist theory with the attempt to lay the ground for a micro-institutionalist theory of policy implementation.

policy and although it is applied from different lines of analysis in different ways it offers a valuable perspective for understanding issues of power and rule in different, but related fields that are pivotal for understanding activation in its expressions and implications on different levels as it is „making visible the proliferation of sites and practices of governing, and linking the micropolitics of such practices to the larger mentalities or conceptions of rule“ (Newman and Clarke 2009: 45). In fact, the governmentality approach has been embraced as a valuable theoretical perspective for a better understanding of power and rule in different fields of social policy and social welfare concerning the transformation of the state (Jessop 2007), local government and public service reform (Newman 2001, Clarke 2008, Clarke et al. 2007), social welfare (Cruikshank 1994, 1999, Dean 1995, 1999, McDonald and Marston 2005, Marston and Mc Donald 2006), social work (Kessl 2005, Anhorn et al. 2008) and education (Ricken and Rieger-Ladich 2004, Weber and Maurer 2005)[28].

The governmentaltity perspective derives from the work of Michel Foucault, in particular the notion of governmentality (*governmentalitè*) surfaces in his lectures at the Collège of France in 1978 and 1979 concerned with tracing the shift in ways of thinking about and exercinsing power (Foucualt 2004, 2006). As Bröckling et al. (2011) point out, Foucault's interest in governmentality signals a correction and refinement in his analysis of power. In his earlier work he had approached the issue of power primarily in terms of struggle, war and confrontation, but from the mid 1970's on it turned out that his initial conceptions of the micro-physics of power had two serious limitations. „On the one hand, the analytical accent lay mainly on the individual body and its disciplinary formation, and there was no consideration of more comprehensive processes of subjectification. As a result, the analysis of power could not do justice to the double character of this process as a practice of subjugation and a form of self-constitution. One the other hand, in the critique of state centered approaches, focusing only on local practices and specific institutions like the hospital and the prison turned out to be insufficient. It was, it seemed, necessary to analyze the state's strategic role in the historical organisation of power relationships and the establishment of global structures of domination. What was needed, then was a double expansion of the analytic apparatus, in order to appropriately account for both processes of subjectification and state formation.“ (Bröckling et al. 2011: 1f). With the concept of

[28] Bröckling et al. (2011) trace the spread of governmentaltity studies during the 1990s also beyond the circle of Foucault's direct associates. At the end of the 1990's the governmentality approach began to attract a great deal of interest also outside the French and Anglophone world, especially in Germany. In this context a Foucauldian perspective got prominent e.g. also in the crtical German debate on social work (Kessl and Krasmann 2005, Kessl 2005, Anhorn at al. 2008).

governmentality Foucault introduced a new theoretical orientation and guideline in his following work on power analysis allowing him to examine power relations form the perspective of „conduct of conduct“ (Foucault 2000: 341). In this sense, the concept of governmentality mediates between power and subjectivity, showing how techniques of rule are tied to technologies of the self, and of how techniques of government recur in the ways the individual acts upon him- or herself. Furthermore, the concept allows critical scrutiny between techniques of power and forms of knowledge, as governmental practices make use of specific rationalities, representations and interpretations. Thus, the concept of governmentality is particularly suitable to analyse processes of state formation in close connection to changing forms of subjectification. That is to say, that Foucault is less interested in the historical reconstruction of political structures but rather in the long-term co-evolution of modern statehood and modern subjectivity. In this sense, Foucault's understanding of the state is first and formost not one of a centralized structure, but rather one of a „tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques and totalization procedures“ (Foucualt 2000: 332). Thus, Foucault dicusses the development of the modern state from the viewpoint of the genesis of politcal knowledge on the government of people. Hereby he points out the linkage between political and pastoral power, the former as being derived from the ancient *polis* and organised as the public with its concern to law and universality, the latter as being rooted in the the Christian religious conception centred upon the comprehensive guidance of the individual (Bröckling et al. 2011). Unlike the ancient political power approach to government, power derived from the notion of Christian pastorate (*Idee des christilichen Hirtenamtes, Pastoralmacht*) „is characterized by the development of analytic methods, techniques of reflection and supervision intended to secure the ‚inner truth' of the individuals“ (Bröckling et al. 2011: 3). Foucault observes the ongoing expansion and secularization of such pastoral guidance techniques during the sixteenth and seventeenth century which eventually produced forms of subjectification the modern state and capitalist society could in turn develop. This introduction of a new rationality of government is central in Foucault's analysis of the emergence of liberal governmentality in the eighteenth century. In fact, he understands liberalism less as an economic theory or political ideology but first and foremost as a specific art of government with the distinctive feature of the replacement of external regulation by inner production. In this sense, liberalism is seen as limiting itself to the simple guarantee of freedoms but as going beyond, as a governmental praxis which structures and organizes the conditions under which individuals can make use of these freedoms. Individual

freedom is, hence, not seen as standing opposed to liberal government, but it rather constitutes a necessary reference point and indispensable instrument of the liberal art of government. However, this art of government has to face the problem of the „production costs“ of freedom and necessitates new mechanisms of control and forms of intervention since liberal government „not only produces freedom threatened by its own dynamics, but the danger or permanent threat of ‚insecurity' (in the form of poverty, unemployment, disease, etc.) is an existential premise and basic element of that very freedom“ (Bröckling et al. 2011: 6). In this sense, liberalism creates a culture of danger as its psychological and cultural correlative, which supplies the key to the moral dimension of the liberal art of government. „When exposed to such danger, individuals are expected to cope with them and their entrepreneurial activities and individual responsibility are what decide social ascent and descent. Consequently, social inequalities are not the result of a mistakenly organized society but an indispensable element of its well arranged daily functioning.“ (Bröckling et al. 2011: 6). Based on this concepetion of liberal governmentality Foucault discusses, at the end of the lecture series at the Collège de France, the further development of liberal positions in the twentieth century and criticises neo-liberalism associated with the Chicago School. According to Foucault the programme of neo-liberalism involves a systematic expansion of the economic sphere into the social, extending the economy as a single social realm into a process of governing all human behaviour with government itself as a sort of enterprise and the individual learning „that freedom consists in not simply regarding oneself as an enterprise but becoming an entrepreneur of oneself and all the innate and acquired skills, talents and capacities that comprise ‚human capital'" (Dean 1999: 158).

A governmentality approach offers critical insights for social policy reserach. As McKee (2009) underlines, it illuminates „how the governable subject is discursively constituted and produced through particular strategies, programmes and techniques“ (Mc Kee 2009: 468). By highlighting how mentalities of rule are made practical and technical within specific practices for directing human conduct, the governmentality perspective shows how political rationalities become manifest in the micro practices of daily social life, linking what is politically desirable with what is (or should believed to be) practically - and this means also personally - possible (Rose/Miller 1992). However, a governmentality approach is not primarily concerned with the „truth“ or „falsity“ of such political rationalities, rather is shows how they are constructed as objective knowledge in practice. In these sense, these political rationalities are not seen as fixed or universal, but they are conceived as heterogeneous and historically contingent and, thus, as represented by

particular responses to particular problems under particular circumstances. In this sense, the governmentality approach offers a useful perspective to destabilise taken for granted ideas, beliefs and ways of thinking, to illustrate the inventedness of the world and, thus, to undermine the familiarity of the present (Burchell 1993, Rose 1999a). In the field of social policy, a governmentality perspective emphasises that government policies themselves are historically contingent social artefacts (Marston and McDonald 2006) and this way it provides a critical perspective to consider also alternate ways of thinking and acting on social issues (Dean 1999). Furthermore, the governmental approach highlights how mentalities of rule involve specific organised practices which embody also a moral dimension purporting „'truths' about who we are or what we should be" (McKnee 2009: 468). In this sense, it offers a valuable perspective to understand how mentalities of rule arise in the moral discourses of activation. „Governmentality-inspired analyses identify the moral and ethical discourses as they are played out in social practices, for example, in the programmes of workfare states. Active labour market policies are deeply embedded within a particular morality where social citizenship becomes conditional on individuals adopting an active disposition, narrowly defined in terms of economic participation. This moral set takes on a taken-for-granted, rule-like status in that economic participation is put forward as the key-maker of the responsible adult citizen." (McDonald and Marston 2005: 379).

In this sense, a governmentality perspective looks beyond institutions or the political power of the state as one explicit authority (Rose and Miller 1992). Rather it conceives the art of government in a broader sense as „conduct of the conduct" (Foucault 2000: 341), as governing individuals not only through the domination of external constraints and actors but through private acts of self-government in different areas of live civil society and individuals are held responsible to. Such a perspective is, thus, particularly suitable to depict the departure from traditional forms of hierarchical state control towards different forms of state intervention in the various domains of an enabling state (Newman 2001) seeking to govern „through the responsible and prudential choices and actions of individuals on behalf of themselves and those for whom they feel an emotional bond or affinity" (Dean 1999: 133f). Looking at activation policies from this angle highlights that the endeavour to devolve responsibility and autonomy to "active" citizens represents a form of regulated freedom in which the ethical obligation of the individual to be his own entrepreneur capable of action is used as a political strategy to secure the ends of government. In this sense, projects of self-hood are not exempt from power, on the contrary, by isolating the self as terrain of action and making it responsible to exercise power upon itself, the arena of government is even

further extended into the very depths of the personal. (Rose 1999b, Cruikshrank 1999). In this context, frontline work plays a crucial role for the reproduction of subjectivities in activation regimes aligning social relations and identities with the end and means of state intervention. In fact, McDonald and Marston point out that case management has become a key technology in governing unemployment „representing a radical localization of governance wherein the rights and responsibilities between unemployed people and the state are articulated primarily in the relationship between the case manager and his or her client." (McDonald and Marston 2005: 374). Their reserach is intended to map the contours through which power and authority operate in the micro relations of case management and to show how unemployed people are subject to technologies of agency aimed at producing the desired active citizen capable of self-government and of managing his or her own risks. The ethical self people should aspire to is characterised by motivation and preserverance and case managers play a crucial role in the constitution of this project of self-hood of advanced liberalism. In this perspective, macro rationalities of advanced liberalism are translated into the micro practices of "activation work" and the problem of unemployment and the unemployed themselves are governed „at a distance trough the inculcation of the right attitudes and behaviour representative of responsible self government" (McDonald and Marston 2005: 390f). Such a perspective is particularly suitable to challenge the political rationality of activation and its orientation to the ‚problems' of unemployment and welfare state dependency, and to recognise frontline work in activation services as an important arena of government bringing, thus, an additional conceptual depth and a more critical view to a street-level perspective. According to McDonald and Marston the challenge raised by a governmentality based analysis of activation programmes is „to resist the temptation to understand unemployment as a list of risk indicators or character deficits, and to insist on placing the problem of unemployment within a social context of power and authority" (McDonald and Marston 2005: 397). In this sense, McDonald and Marston conceive their contribution less as simply speaking truth to power or dispelling universal myths, but rather as a form of counter-politics able to examine how the category of „the unemployed" is produced and restrained by the relations of social rule embedded in the practice of activation. This means „to pay close attention to how mutual recognition and respect are either fostered or eroded at the street-level of employment policies. The collaborative and empathetic qualities that are produced in relations between case managers and clients, for example, are lost when coercive authority is punitively exercised in the form of a sanction or ‚breach'. It is at this level of interaction that citizenship and subjectivity are given meaning, a form of

subjectivity that is sometimes very different than that intended by policy makers.“ (McDonald and Marston 2005: 397).

Of course, governmentality as a theoretical approach has also been challenged, even though, as McKee (2009) argues, many of these critiques would be more accurately related to secondary positions which appropriated Foucault’s ideas. However, a first point of critique concerns the disregard of empirical reality in governmentality studies which often draw mainly on a discursive dimension rather than on the more specific and concrete ways of governing in material practices. McKnee refutes this critisised disconnection between the study of mentalities of rule and the social relation they are embedded in by referring to Foucault’s very own concern to analyze power relations through the antagonism of practical strategies. Nonetheless, McKnee agrees that some of the post-Foucauldian governmentaltity literature might be rightly labeled as discursive and as eschewing empirical analysis since it uses governmentality in a mainly diagnostic rather than descripitve way and is less concerned with the actual operation and the messy empirical actualities of systems of rule. This kind of orientation is obviously problematic within a more policy and practice oriented research agenda and, eventually, it also fails to account for why the discursively constituted governable subject might not turn up in practice, or as McKee makes the point: „Whilst ‚reality’ is perhaps of less concern to those solely concerned with tracing changes in thought through text-based discourse, it is a problem for those researchers interested in the effects of power at the micro level and the lived experience of subjection; this is all the more significant given Foucualt’s own methodological approach was concerned with the inherent ability of the subject to think and to act otherwise.“ (McKee 2009: 474). A second point of critique, related to the first one, has been that governmentality promotes a view of governing which reduces politics to rationality contributing, thus, to a omnipresent and totalising representation of power with no space for human agency and meaningful individual freedom and to a mechanistic view of the social as machine (Hunter 2003). Of course the strength of the governmentality approach lies in focusing on the discursive formation of the subject as governmental strategy. But it cannot be assumed that the reproduction of subjectivities happens automatically and that power necessarily always realises its effects (Clarke et al. 2007). In fact, exactly with regard to the implementation of workfare policies, McDonald and Marston (2006) ,e.g., show how the creation of the active employable citizen is subject to challenge and contestation from below - i.e. also from the frontline of activation services - and that practices of resistance and refusal are part of the processes of government or better that they even „are the sorts of cracks and fissures that governmentality alerts us to look for“

(McDonald and Marston 2006: 394). In this sense, also McKee (2009) underlines that proponents of governmentality as a top-down discursive approach have failed to accord practices of resistance the constitutive role which Foucault basically made available through his work. „By ignoring the messiness of realpolitiks, this top-down discursive approach neglects that subjection is neither a smooth nor a a complete project; rather one inherently characterized by conflict, contestation and instability. Moreover, it downplays the way in which governmental programmes and strategies are themselves internally contradictory, continually changing and capable of mutation“ (McKee 2009: 474). Another critique of governmentality concerns Foucault's rejection of state theory stressing that the emphasis on the dispersed and capillary nature of power illuminates the plurality of sites of government but downplays the influence of institutions and the central role of the state in shaping social policies. Concerning this matter, McKee (2009) gives to consider that a close reading of Foucault reveals that even though he rejects a notion of the state as unified monolithic ruler, he nonetheless recognises the importance of the state as one site where power condenses and that centralising and decentralising forces in the exertion of power don't have to be necessarily seen as mutually exclusive. However, although McKee deemphasizes or even refutes the main points of critique by going back to Foucault's original thoughts, she argues for a „realist“ governmentality approach (Stenson 2008) as a useful way forward for theoretically informed empirical research within the critical social policy tradition. McKee argues that going beyond a traditional discursive governmentality approach and complementing it with empirical accounts brings into focus the micro practices of local governing and the interpretations and behaviour of involved actors and opens up the possibility of contradiction and contestation between and within governmental strategies. This „realist“ approach is sensitive to the contingent temporal and spatial factors that may shape governmental rationalities and offers, thus, a more nuanced and finer analysis of governing *in situ* and of the complex struggles around the reproduction of subjectivities whilst retaining the analytical key of the governmentality perspective. In this sense it offers a critical and deepening completion to the street-level bureaucracy approach not excluding at the same time a perspective focused more on the agency of contextualised actors and their meaning-making and reflexive efforts. „By focusing on strategies from below which aim to resist governmental ambitions, this emphasizes that subjects are reflexive and can accommodate, adapt, contest or resist top-down endeavours to govern them if they so wish. Recognizing multiple voices and the contested nature of identity may also negate the

tendency to focus on mentalities of rule from the perspective of the rulers, programmers and planners alone, thereby introducing a more grounded perspective.“ (Mc Kee 2009: 479).

However, the discussion on challenges and limitations of Post-Foucauldian governmentality in social policy analysis goes on. Darmon and Perez (2011), e.g., provide an analysis of labour market and career guidance „as an instrument of liberal governmental rationality, and hence as a key tool for shaping attitudes suitable for the labour market“ (Darmon and Perez 2011: 77). They underline that during the last decades a new conception of guidance went alongside with a new conception of work and an ongoing re-commodification of labour, making labour market and career guidance a central tool for „the mobilization of more floating, ‚portable' competences and skills, whose maintenance and enhancement is supposed to be the new protection of the individual on the labour market“ (Darmon and Perez 2011: 78) and beyond. What Darmon and Perez question in this regard, is the suitability of the application of the Foucauldian notion of „conduct of conduct“ grounded in the theorization of the liberal art of government. Their critique objects that the idea of government through freedom inadequately renders „the kind of fostering of stereotypical attitudes taking place through disciplinary instruction in the compulsory or strongly incentivized arrangements of activation programmes or through the performative actualization of a ‚career management' competence in the formally voluntary arrangements of lifelong guidance (...) and the kinds of mechanisms at work for the mobilization of staff as active and effective relays of the policy goals“ (Darmon and Perez 2011: 78).[29] According to Darmon and Perez the way a governmentality approach theorizes conduct makes a problematic conflation between freedom and adaptation. Instead they go back to Weber and his distinction between life conduct (*Lebensführung*) as key to the spirit of modern capitalism and adaptation as associated to the later mechanisation into bureaucratic capitalism, pointing out that „adaptation, as such, is fundamentally antithetic to conducting one's life. Self-determined life conduct stems from an inner orientation and constancy of direction, and it is that inner drive, in opposition to external constraint or ‚stereotyping' that endows one's conduct with a plasticity and capacity for action and adapting to new situations (...). By contrast, adaptation to the ‚instrinsic logic' of bureaucratic capitalism requires the ‚inner tuning' (*Eingestelltheit*) of dispositions and affects to certain ‚forms of life' whether through discipline or the ingraining of habit; or/and the development of an inner rationality

[29] Concerning this critique it could be argued though that the governmental perspective refers to freedom in its ambivalence highlighting insecurity as an existential premise and basic element of that freedom, as pointed out above. The rationality of liberal government creates, hence, anyway a culture of danger and introduces a moral dimension and new mechanisms of control which structure the conditions under which individuals can make use of freedom (Bröckling et al. 2011).

spurred by social aspirations and economic interests“ (Darmon and Perez 2011: 82). In this sense, adaptation is very different from self-determined life conduct as it entails the erosion of the personal in facing up to the world, an aspect Darmon and Perez connect to Sennett’s (1998) argument on the corrosion of character. In short, what Darmon and Perez criticise is „that Foucault’s notion of power as government unites what Weber had distinguished: administration (which, along-side the capitalist firm, seeks to mould ‚types of men’ and their ‚form of life’ amenable to the requirements of bureaucratic capitalism) and politics (the sphere of struggle, as well as of self-determination and affirmation, to be fought for by men and women whose life conduct is oriented to a cause)“ (Darmon and Perez 2011: 83). In this context, the reference to this critique is not made for holding up the subtleties of a mere theoretical debate. On the contrary, Weber’s notion of adaptation to the logic of bureaucracy offers an interesting additional perspective for the purpose of this work. Darmon and Perez highlight that the propulsion of career and labour market guidance in the context of activation and mobilisation for work has been accompanied by the adoption of marketisation as the structuring principle for service provision and by the managerialisation of providers introducing a culture of targets and standards. However, Darmon and Perez sustain that beneath this external constraints the imposition of mangerialism on staff requires also a more direct fostering of adequate attitudes and the mobilisation of staff as active relays of the governmental aims of activation and guidance. Accordant strategies include the active remodelling of staff through recruitment, e.g. by recruiting younger people with less experience who are subsequently trained in-house, or even the redesign of professional qualifications in the light of the new mobilisation and activation agenda. But the findings of Darmon and Perez „also reveal the importance, in that respect, of ‚tricks’ inherent in managerial mechanisms across most programmes and centres studied: contradictory injunctions, the creation of dependencies, the misuse of collegiality and the engineering of the relaxation of professional stances put individuals in a position where, in order to ‚perform well’, they may have to go not only against what they consider a ‚job well done’ but even against what, as individuals as much as in their professional capacity, they hold as valuable.“ (Darmon and Perez 2011: 92). Mechanisms working as such tricks can be the linking of employment continuity of staff with their target related performance, the introduction of modulated sanctioning giving to frontline staff a key part in assessing the opportunities for sanctioning, the introduction of standardised procedures and software tools and the engineering of competition between colleagues. These mechanisms inevitably bind staff members to the rationality of the organisation making practices of resistance

increasingly difficult, regardless whether they are grounded in a more professional or a more vocational stance, to go back to Weber's notion of vocation as the passionate and personally engaged everyday devotion to a task. Darmon and Perez point out that Weber's notion of adaptation is particularly pertinent to grasp processes such as „the disciplinary attuning of dispositions and affects, the instruction into stereotypical attitudes, the mobilization of self-interest, the introduction of mechanisms with corruptive effects on the capacity to preserve discretion of professional judgment" (Darmon and Perez 2011: 96). In this sense, they suggest that Weber's depicting of adaptation in bureaucratic capitalism can provide a new basis for conceptualising resistance to liberal governmental rationality. In fact, going back to Weber's categories offers a more accurately fitting key to understand the mechanisms of staff mobilisation in activation services than the notion of conduct of conduct offered by a governmentality approach.

However, in spite of its possible theoretical and empirical limitations, a governmentality approach is useful to highlight that frontline work in activation services has to be conceived as power in situ and as an important arena for the government of people. It offers a critical perspective which illuminates the role of frontliners in linking and transforming the mentalities of rule of activation to processes of subjectification as active and, hence, "deserving" citizens.

2.4.3. Meaning in action: frontline practice as situated agency

A third theoretical perspective to look at frontline work in activation services comes from a more constructivist approach to governance grounded in interpretive political science. The most notable contribution in this respect comes from political scientists Bevir and Rhodes (2006, 2008, 2010) who propose an approach attuned to contemporary conceptions of governance and who position it in opposition to traditional approaches in political science. They outline an interpretive approach to political science that recognises situated agency in a heterarchic field of state power and emphasises the importance of interpreting governance by looking at practices form the bottom up. Bevir and Rhodes highlight that practices of governance arise out of actions based on sets of beliefs informed by traditions. In this sense they label their approach as decentred and anti-foundationalist. According to Bevir and Rhodes (2006) a decentred view on governance means "to focus on the social construction of policy networks through the ability of individuals to create meaning. A decentred approach changes our view of governance. It encourages us to examine the way in which individuals

create, sustain and modify social life, institutions and policies. It encourages us to recognize that institutional norms – or some logic of modernization – do not fix the actions of individuals. They arise from the beliefs individuals adopt against the background of traditions and in response to dilemmas. (…) (A) decentered approach implies that governance arises from the bottom up." (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 91). In this sense, the notion of decentredness in Bevir and Rhodes' approach does not, or at least not in the first instance, refer to the fragmentation of the policy arena and the displacement of the policy process to networks of actors inside and outside the traditional realms of the state. Rather decenteredness stands for "a focus on practices of governance in which actors of all stripes understand issues and attempt to solve them by interpreting the situation at hand" (Waagenar 2011: 92). In their book, *The State as Cultural Praxis* (2010), Bevir and Rhodes further develop their approach and seek to provide a theory of the state as "meaning in action" (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: vii). Their theory directly challenges new institutionalism as the most significant present day-strand in political science by rejecting any essentialist theory of the state and by holding up the idea of politics as cultural practice. They seek to provide a diverse theory of state authority and its exercise, which conceives the state as a set of practices rooted in varied set of beliefs and which clearly arises from an anti-foundational perspective. As Bevir and Rhodes argue "(a)nti-Foundationalists explicitly reject the idea of given truths whether based on pure reasons or pure experience. As a result, they emphasize the constructed nature of concepts, actions, and institutions. Constructivist theories suggest meanings are the stuff of all the social sciences where meanings are invented as much as found. Here anti-foundationalism has implications beyond the epistemological domain. The actors studied by social scientists do not have pure perceptions or pure reason. Thus, their reasoning, beliefs, desires, and actions cannot be simply read off from allegedly objective social facts about them. Rather, social scientists have to explore how people construct the world through acting on beliefs they also construct." (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: 73). In this sense, Bevir and Rhodes point out that it is not institutions (understood in a broad sense, e.g. also as policies) that completely fix actions, rather institutions are seen as contingent products of ongoing actions, struggles and negotiations. Their approach, hence, recognises the possibility of situated agency making it the bedrock and the microlevel of their theory. But they distinguish between autonomy and agency. As anti-foundationalists they reject the idea of an autonomous self who can form beliefs and act outside any context. Rather agency is always situated within cultural, historical and political contexts which shape thoughts and actions. Thus, experiences, reasoning and actions occur always within a web of beliefs. But

as Bevir and Rhodes underline "to reject autonomy is not necessarily to reject agency. To accept agency is to imply people have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, and in so doing they can trasform the social background. So, agency is possible, but is always situated in a particular context." (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: 74). But their concept of agency differs from the understanding of agency in the institutionalist claim of rational actors within institutional settings. As already mentioned, in the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes the context of agency is conceived as the wider web of beliefs of the actor embedded in a historical tradition and instead of rationality associated with rational choice they propose the notion of local reasoning. They underline that "(r)easoning is always local in that it occurs against the backcloth of agents existing web of beliefs. The adjective local refers, in other words, to reasoning that always takes place against the background of a particular subjective or intersubjective web of beliefs. While the content of the relevant web of beliefs varies from case to case, there is no possibility of reasoning outside any such background. To insist on the local nature of reasoning is thus to preclude the autonomous and universal concept of reasoning and subjectivity associated with much rational choice theory." (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: 74). In the context of this work this approach offers a refined understanding of activation work sensitive to the meanings of frontliners as situated actors and their respective implications of policy outcomes (Maron 2014). In this sense, the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes is highly suitable for bringing people back in, not as autonomous rational actors, but as situated agents informed by certain political contexts but with their own capacities of local reasoning, meaning-making and acting, giving thus on their part shape to the web of beliefs and traditions they are embedded in (Bevir and Rhodes 2010). As Waagenar (2011) points out, the concept of tradition in the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes balances agency and determinism in understanding intention and meaning in the world of politics. Tradition is conceived as a set of understandings and beliefs conveyed during socialisation. However, it is not necessarily constitutive of the beliefs and actions that people later hold and perform. The tradition is continued in its contents only if the situated agency of people has not lead to change them.

In this sense, the main features of this approach can be usefully combined with the other approaches outlined above. On the one hand it deepens a street-level perspective adding to the more pragmatic view of the use of discretion as needed for real world solutions a more nuanced concept of agency as situated in web of beliefs and historical traditions. This allows to connect the interpretations of situated agents like street-level staff with the

background of welfare culture as beliefs that surround, inform and either justify or oppose social policy and forms of welfare state intervention (Pfau-Effinger 2005). Thus, the focus is not only on how the individual as street-level bureaucrat deals with dilemmas to get his or her job done, but also on what the own job means to members of frontline staff, what beliefs inform them in their agency, when they encounter dilemmas conceived not only as resulting from scarce resources such as time and information, but rather as resulting from beliefs which contrast with the ideational background of policy and how they react on these dilemmas on the basis of their own beliefs and understandings. One the other hand, the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes is sympathetic to the decentred approach to power and authority of a governmentality perspective. However, it leaves more space for the role of human agency and hence also for the possibility of resistance and change with respect to mentalities of rule and rationalities of governing people in the arena of frontline work in activation services.

Wagenaar (2011) underlines Bevir and Rhodes' theoretical perceptivness and their awareness of strengths and weaknesses of interpretive approaches. In fact, he sees their interpretive approach as a sort of third way between hermeneutics and poststructuralism. On the one hand Bevir and Rhodes' approach is sympathetic to the decentered approach of poststructuralists such as Foucault, "who see meaning as emerging from an almost randomly thrown together assemblage of practices, beliefs, and meanings that makes the very existence of certain social categories possible" (Waganaar 2011: 91), while on the other one they do not share the poststructuralist hostility toward the role of human agency. But as Wagenaar points out, Bevir and Rhodes try also to stay clear of the individualistic assumptions of classical hermeneutics, as it departs from an epistemologically questionable subjectivity and essentialism seeing the subject as autonomous and its reasoning as pure and universal (Wagenaar 2011). In this sense, the interpretive approach of Bevir and Rhodes highlights the importance of situated agency informed by ideas and values. In their decentered conception of the state as meaning in action, Bevir and Rhodes refuse a single account or theory of governance as well as a top down approach to state regulation. Rather they argue that, eventually, the state arises out of the diverse actions and practices inspired by different beliefs and traditions, as contingent product of actions and struggles of situated agents rooted in traditions. "Our approach seeks to explain the state by reference to historical meanings infusing the beliefs and practices of individual actors. It encourages political scientists to decentre the state and governance and focus on the social construction of practices. We unpack the state into the disparate and contingent beliefs that inform the diverse actions of

individuals. We reveal the contingent and conflicting beliefs that inform the diverse actions that constitute the state. We challenge the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces, norms, or laws define changing patterns of governance. Instead we argue that the state is constructed differently by many actors inspired by different ideas and values." (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: 99). Such a perspective challenges the idea of universal rationalities and their effects and brings to the fore the local reasoning of individual actors. In this sense, this approach is particularly suitable to bring people and their stories back in, stories of daily social interactions, of the experience of dilemmas and stories of resistance, stories that show the several understandings of central intentions as well as the intended and unintended consequences of local reasoning and acting. Such stories are central for the understanding of how policy is eventually shaped on the ground as they are the very stuff that fills the 'implementation gap' in policy implementation and the reform of public services. In this sense, it can be argued with Bevir (2004) that "the fate of policies depend on the ways in which civil servants, citizens and others understand them and respond to them from various traditions. Postfoundational interpretivism thus seems to guide as toward dialogic and bottom-up approaches to public policy." (Bevir 2004: 622).

Wagenaar (2011) discusses Bevir and Rhodes' approach as an example of interpretive policy analysis which falls in the classical heremeneutic tradition. According to Waagenar the heremeneutic approach to meaning "focuses on the way individual agents move about in this background of understanding, on how the interpret themselves in light of it. The task of the hermeneutic researcher is to make the actions of individual agents intelligible against a backdrop of shared understandings and routines." (Wagenaar 2011: 40). Interpretive policy approaches within this tradition share two characteristic features of classical hermeneutics. The first is the deliberate aim to clarify what is obscure by looking for the particular meanings which are hidden behind formal policy. The second one consists in the phenomenological assumption "that the experiences of policy actors are, if not the bedrock of understanding meaning in society, then at least a convenient entrance for discovering it." (Waagenar 2011: 71). As Waganaar argues, hermeneutic interpretation is a valid and sophisticated tool in understanding policy problems, which offers a decisive added value to traditional empiricist policy analysis approaches. In fact, on the basis of their ethnographic analyses of governance in action, Bevir and Rhodes decentre the account of the British executive and counter a dominant view of government. Without neglecting the role of the centre for the coordination and implementation of policies they focus on the interplay of traditions, dilemmas and agency in the process of governance and highlight the decisive role

of policy actors as situated agents and the ways how a string centralised government can be resisted and confounded (Bevir and Rhodes 2006). In this sense, this approach offers a valid perspective for a bottom-up approach on the implementation of activation policies able to grasp frontline work as meaning in action and to highlight how frontliners as policy actors shape policy outcomes against the background of their very own understanding of their role and their job. But despite its focus on the individual understanding its classification within the classical hermeneutic tradition, Bevir and Rhodes's perspective seems to be also open for a more dialogical approach on meaning, focusing on the social and practical nature of meaning. As Waagenar (2011) points out, dialogical approaches on meaning share the principles that the activity of understanding is grounded in every day experiences and that understanding proceeds through dialogue between actors or actors and the world, affecting both parties involved. A dialogical approach to meaning conceives understanding as always historically effected, imperfect, partial and incomplete but it opens up for dialogue as the „fusions of horizons", to use Gadamers terms. Gadamer (1972) uses the concept of horizon to underline the epistemic claim that understanding is not possible as a detached observer but occurs from within a particular 'horizon' that is determined by our historically-determined situatedness. However, understanding is not imprisoned within a static or unchanging horizon, rather it is an universal and ongoing process susceptible to change through the encounter with other horizons of understanding. In this sense, Gadamer's conceives understanding as a matter of negotiation, of coming to an agreement thorugh the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Such an approach to understanding also reintroduces an ethical moment in hermeneutics. „Understanding as a fusion of horizons, a concept that is based on our being-in the world as engaged agents, collapses the fact-value dichotomy. The corroding agent here is the abandoning of the pursuit of control over knowledge and, by implication, over the object of our understanding. A dialogical notion of understanding implies that we can never have full control over that which we try to understand. This works in two ways. First, I am not fully transparent to myself and, second, I must be willing to open myself to the other. I always understand the other, the object of my understanding, from the perspective of my horizon, but the latter has itself been formed by my cultural and historical background." (Wagenaar 2011: 206f).

On the basis of this interpretation of understanding, Wagenaar (2011) argues that narrative approaches can offer valid insights for understanding policy implementation. Wagenaar is aware of the risk of an oversell of stories in the social sciences and of the risk to misapply them as a means of giving a gloss of human meaning to the mundane business of

research. But he points out, that stories have a function, that they work and stand for a distinct mode of knowing which, by implication, constitutes also the challenge in narrative analysis, namely „to demonstrate the particular *narrative* – as opposed to logico-deductive, classificatory, or straightforwardly informational – contribution that storytelling makes to a policy, an organization, a decision. This narrative work ranges from the way that storytelling contributes to practical judgement, to the way policy makers move about in a world of indeterminate outcomes, emerging time, and deep conflict, to the more straightforwarded representation of political doctrine. What these narrative functions have in common is the insight that stories work relationally. The meaning of a story is not locked up in the constituent elements of the text, but is constructed – actively, dynamically – in a continuous interaction among the storyteller, the elements of the story, his audience and the environment they share.“ (Wagenaar 2011: 209f). In this sense stories are dialogues working as an epistemic strategy in order to accord knowing with coming to an understanding. This implies that stories are open-ended, provisional and temporary scenarios in the process of understanding and mastering everyday reality, not by reducing it to a simplified model but by „doing justice to the whole *buzzing blooming confusion* of factual, affective and moral ambiguities that characterize ordinary life“ (Waganaar 2011: 212). In their narrative analysis of street level bureaucracy, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) show how stories are important for understanding the process of practical judgement in the inevitable tension between following rules and procedures and accommodating the spirit of the law to the particulars of concrete people in ordinary everyday situations. „The world of cops, teachers and counsellors is a baffling terrain, dense with laws, rules and procedures; bounded by overlapping hierarchical and agency relationships; and populated with the diverse and often hard to read faces of citizens, clients, supervisors and coworkers. It is a world where identity and moral judgements are bound up with the quotidian work of the state. This is the frontline of public service.“ (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 8). Frontline stories show how frontline workers move about in this baffling terrain and in the tension between legalism and accomodation, how they come to an understanding about what is fair or the right thing to do in a given situation and how they master in this way their everyday reality on the frontline of public services. In this sense, frontline workers adopt a narrative mode of knowing and accounting since the large questions, ambiguities and dilemmas rarely present themselves as abstract issues but usually in the guise of concrete people (Wagenaar 2011), or as Maynard-Moody and Musheno make the point: „Front-line workers do not think abstractly about the deserving poor: they deal with the blind woman who qualifies for assistance but has a

personality disorder that will forever limit her ability to function in society. They do not worry about the policy of zero tolerance for drugs when they ignore the small-scale marijuana dealing of a hard working day laborer." (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 23). Of course these representations of people in subjective stories are never indifferent, but they indicate beliefs and moral positionings and, eventually, they serve for establishing plausible connections between interpretations and subsequent behaviour and actions. In this sense stories do not only enlarge the understanding of a situation but at the same time they serve as instructions and justifications of actions in the situation at hand. Analysing the stories of welfare officials Wagenaar (2006, 2011) reveals the complex work of practical judgement in the field of administrative discretion in welfare services. „In fact, the whole distinction between rule application and discretion, between rule and setting, collapses in the light of this kind of narrative analysis. Administrative work *is* practical judgement. It involves a careful balancing of incompatible demands, the judging of clients to obtain ground for acting, the weighing of the effects of one's actions, on both the client and the organization, a constant calculation of personal risk, an ongoing positioning of oneself in one's relevant social environment, a careful calibration of what is right and what is just in a particular, concrete situation (...) Much of this work takes place tacitly, behind the scenes, in the workflow of an experienced administrator who acts on the situation at hand." (Wagenaar 2011: 218). In this context, it must be highlighted that the implementation of policies is sustained by the own and often highly resistant narratives of policies. The process of policy making is faced with its inescapable characteristics of indeterminacy, unpredictability, conflict and the imperative to act, and policy narratives provide the necessary assumptions for decision making. (Waagenar 2011). In this sense, frontline stories from the frontline of activation services have to be critically scrutinised also for the underlying narratives of activation, their meaning to situated agents and their adoption and perpetuation (or challenge) in frontline practice. Analysing the Israeli case, Maron (2014), e.g., stresses the importance of acknowledging the culturally and politically embedded practice of situated agents in the production of individualised activation services. According to Maron, a constructivist approach to governance "enables us to reconstruct the meaning-making that underpins the actions of *situated agents* so that we can understand the emerging actions and interactions between them" (Maron 2014: 106). Maron adopts this perspective to scrutinise the governance of institutions and individuals in the Israeli welfare-to-work programme showing how beliefs, discourses and local practices of meso-level regulation and street-level work contribute to the emergence of a new and stringent activation mode. He demonstrates

that the meaning-making of situated agents is essential to examining shifts in the forms of governance and their implications. Emerging relations of governance between the state and private service providers intersect with stringent and disciplinary interpersonal governance relations between frontline staff and programme participants. So, ultimately, the mode of activations reconfigures the social contract between the state and its citizens via "*intensive intimacies*: a conflicted micro social-space governed with little discretion and imbued with a reformative vision of the relations between the state and its participants. This reformative vision is based on a model of the resilient citizen: a proactive and responsible participant, contributing via flexible labor to the Israeli neoliberal project." (Maron 2014: 21).

Of course, also interpretive approaches in policy analysis have been object of critiques. Bevir and Rhodes (2006) defend their interpretive approach against common criticisms by pointing out that its distinctiveness is given by the extent it privileges meanings as ways to grasp action and it holds that beliefs and practices are constitutive of each other. Such an approach is challenged by positions which want to defend political science as relying on hard data, experimental testing and methodological rigour and, thus, dismiss interpretations as subjective, fuzzy and impressionistic. Bevir and Rhodes respond to these critiques by challenging positivist idols and pointing out that "(a)n interpretive approach explores the ways in which social practices are created sustained and transformed through the interplay and contest of the beliefs embedded in human activity" (Bevir/Rhodes 2006b: 71). In this sense, their approach relies on the philosophical claim "that meaning does not merely put a particular affective or evaluative gloss on things, but that is somehow *constitutive* of political actions, governing institutions and public policies" (Wagneaar 2011: 4) and derives from that its epistemological and methodological principles. In fact, as it has been already shown in chapter one, also in comparative welfare state research the importance of ideas has been brought back on stage and the reception of Bevir and Rhodes' approach shows that the point that policy analysis needs to pay more attention to the ideas and meanings propounded by policy actors themselves, is increasingly taken into account.[30] Analysing third way welfare reforms in Germany and the United Kingdom, Hudson, Hwang

[30] This awareness is reflected by a group of different approaches in social policy analysis. Hajer and Wagenaar (2003), for instance, coined the term of „deliberative policy analysis" and Fischer and Forester (1993) introduced the term „argumentative turn" in order to emphasize the relevance of argumentation, language and deliberation in the policy-making process and to challenge the epistemological limitations of a neopositivist and technocratic approach to policy analysis (see also Fischer and Gottweis 2012). To some extent the interpretive approach to political science by Bevir and Rhodes comes close to these differntly coined approaches and it can in any case be attributed to a group of approaches which are sensitive to situative contexts and situated agencies and emphasize the relevance of local practices of deliberation, argumentation and interpretation in the policy making process.

and Kühner (2008) e.g. assess the analytical utility of this approach against institutionally rooted claims of path dependency. Although they underline that narratives cannot explain everything and that reform trajectories in different contexts continue to be best explained by institutionalised policy legacies and varying policy networks, they also acknowledge that ideas and policy narratives are useful to understand the nature and form of social policy reforms. Accordingly, they recommend multi-theoretic approaches and a closer synthesis of different perspectives centred around ideas, interests and institutions in order to understand processes of policy change. In these sense, ideas can provide a part of the picture. An interpretive approach is, hence, particularly suitable to explore and to understand what happens on the different levels of the policy implementation process and how what arrives as policy on the ground is shaped by the meaning making capacities of situated agents. Thus, this approach offers an important perspective to look at frontline work in activation services giving, as already mentioned, a deeper theoretical underpinning of a street-level perspective on the one hand, and providing, on the other one, a critical perspective that is more sensitive to the situated agency of the policy actors involved.

2.5. On the frontline of activation services: current research perspectives

In fact, the awareness that frontline work matters is reflected by an increasing debate and a discernible body of research which looks at the frontline of local welfare and employment services and takes into account the key role of frontline staff for policy implementation and service delivery in order to "tell the full workfare story", as Brodkin and Marston (2013) underline in the introduction to their recently edited international overview. Much of this work is, indeed, informed by Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach, which has seen an international revival in the analysis of contemporary welfare interactions and across different perspectives stemming from policy implementation, social administration and social work. This revival of the street-level bureaucracy approach must be seen against the background of the activation turn. As its has already been pointed out, the shift towards activation policies and services has changed the very nature of welfare interactions at the frontline of services as they are increasingly founded on people changing technologies (Meyers at al. 1998) which means on active interventions aimed at ensuring or changing individual behaviour, attitudes and compliance. In this context, the role of frontline workers has been considerably transformed and raises new questions on its political,

normative and ethical implications (Hasenfeld, 1999, Kjørstad 2005, Adler 2008, 2013, Fletcher 2011). Kjørstad, for example, investigates the challenges for social workers faced with the implementation of a workfare policy in municipal social welfare offices in Norway pointing out the substantial variations in the implementation of the policy and their importance for the development of a particular practice. Kjorstad underlines the ideological power of workfare, "precisely because it is an imprecise and ambiguous concept" (Kjørstad 2005: 389). Thus, the unclear rhetoric of workfare allows for considerable variation in the use of discretion and the individual social workers can exercise authority in a very clear and concrete manner. Kjørstad shows that internal policies and rules within the municipalities are decisive for the development of frontline practices, but that at the same time there are persisting discretionary spaces. In this sense, social workers find themselves in challenging ethical positions to deal with these spaces between a bureaucratic rationality and their own professional ethics. Kjørstad's findings, however, support "the idea that the social workers in the study are loyal to the workfare policy *and* the idea that social workers experience a considerable degree of freedom of action when implementing this policy. They often *take the bull by the horns* and use their freedom to make decisions that are based upon professional discretion in a very active way, most particularly, by *not* imposing conditions upon recipients of economic and social assistance." (Kjørstad 2005: 392, italics in the original). There are quite a few similar exemplary studies on frontline work and the role of frontline staff in local welfare agencies and public employment services in different countries such as the US, the UK, Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Australia, Norway, etc. (see, for example, Marston et al. 2005, Kjørstad 2005, Wright 2006, Jewell 2007, Thoren 2008, Watkin-Hayes 2009, Dubois 2010, van Berkel et al. 2010, van Berkel 2011, Røysum 2013). The notion of discretion is a central issue in all these studies and although discretion is not new as a topic, there seems to be agreement on its increased importance in the context of activation policies and on the fact that "(f)rontline workers play a key role in providing or denying access to welfare state provisions, in treating clients in a harsh or more lenient way, in distributing sticks and carrots." (van Berkel et al. 2010: 449). However, the findings of these studies differ in their emphasis on different aspects and are far from being non-ambiguos. On the one hand, it is pointed out that in the context of activation street-level decision making processes increasingly involve evaluations of individual behaviour and therefore discretion is more important than when decision making is part of a mere administrative process. On the other hand, it is also highlighted that frontliners themselves are faced with stronger regulations and standardisations of activation programmes and social

assistance schemes and subject to greater indivisualised pressure to deliver certain outcome targets, while the time available for the direct contact with clients or service users is decreasing. As Wright (2013) highlights for the UK context, there is "a disjuncture between the language of professional discretion used to justify the permissive 'black box' model of delivery design and the managerialist type of performance regime that relies on 'procedural governance' to exert control over implementation practices" (Wright 2013: 831). However, these ambiguities in the debate on discretion are less due to different perspectives or research findings but they rather express the very ambiguous nature of discretion itself. As has been already pointed out referring to Lipsky's street-bureaucracy approach, a certain degree of discretion is, on the one hand, required in order to implement policies in complex situations and to translate them in real world solutions and, thus, impossible to abandon completely. On the other hand, however, discretion is always also limited and subject to regulations and managerial control in organisations. It's always in this field of tension that discretion is generated and has to be managed and dealt with. Anyway, the idea of activation and the goals of activation policies as part of a certain political and governmental project (Clarke 2005) constitute a very specific background against which the idea of discretion and the questions how and on which basis it is managed by frontline staff in activation services, are of critical importance.

Van Berkel et al. (2010) summarise the different sources of discretion. First it is the nature of regulations which can have different characteristics such as openness, goal diversity or ambiguity and, hence, affect and pre-structure discretionary spaces. Secondly, discretion is determined by the organisational characteristics of street-level bureaucracies, which define the tasks and, at least to a certain extent, also the procedures for frontline work and, thus, the degree of decision making authority delegated to frontline staff. A third resource for discretion lies in the nature of the work itself. Areas in which the application of clear technologies is neither possible nor conducive rely on a higher degree of discretion (Brodkin 2007). Moreover, also the term and intensity of client contacts as well as the range of effective decision options in frontline work determine the room for discretion. A fourth source for discretion refers also to the nature of the relationship between frontline workers and clients with its power implications. Giving clients real opportunities for voice and choice can work only on the basis of an effectively available discretionary space. As fifth and last source of discretion van Berkel et al. mention new models of service provision that involve a variety of actors through intra- and interagency cooperation, quasi markets and professional cooperations which require discretionary room for the negotiation of solutions.

However, the interesting question is how discretion is eventually dealt with in street-level practice and how different organisational aspects as sources of discretion impact on the daily conduct of frontline staff. Jewell and Glaser (2006) lay out a general framework for investigating how organisational settings mediate between policy goals and frontline behaviour. This framework distinguishes different aspects. The first one is authority as the ability of frontliners to impact on their clients by virtue of their position. Secondly, role expectations refer to their attitudes and interpretations of policy programmes and to what they think their role is in this context. Thirdly, the workload aspect refers to numbers of cases as well as to tasks and decisions required. The fourth aspect, client contact, refers to the frequency, amount of time and the quality of interaction with clients. As a fifth aspect Jewell and Glaser highlight knowledge and expertise encompassing education, training, programmatic knowledge, and knowledge of resources. Finally, the last aspect is given by incentives as formal and informal systems of rewards and sanctions that affect which courses of action frontliners take in practice (Jewell and Glaser 2006).

Taylor and Kelly (2006) examine how far Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach is still applicable in the light of public sector reforms in the UK and, in particular, against the background of increased managerial control over professionals. In this context, it is interesting to highlight the three different dimensions of discretion Taylor and Kelly distinguish for the refinement of the notion of street-level discretion. The first one, rule discretion, "is bounded by legal, fiscal or organizational constraints. Rules may be laid down in the statutes or ordinances of the organization or reflect legislation and directives from government. In theory, the more rules there are the less discretion there will be at the street level." (Taylor and Kelly 2006: 631). A second dimension of discretion, value discretion, is determined by value orientations and ideas of fairness and justice, often also involving codes of conduct or professional codes of ethics. In this sense, "(t)here is an expectation that the professional can be trusted to abide by established and normative professional practice and will also be expected to exercise his or her judgement based on training, knowledge and experience." (Taylor and Kelly 2006: 631). The third dimension, task discretion, relates to the actual ability to carry out given tasks in daily street-level practice. In spite of increased managerial scrutiny in the pursuit of targets, tasks often continue to be complex and to require discretionary action in order to be carried into execution. Of course, these three dimensions of discretion are interrelated and, as Taylor and Kelly make the point, "even within a rule-bound system where accountability is tight, there will always be situations in which street-level bureaucrats will be required to exercise discretion. Rules may not be

operable in unpredictable situations. There will always be a high degree of task discretion at street level because there is more than one way of carrying out tasks, which for many professionals remain complex. However, rules influence tasks, which in turn, determine the extent to which values come into their performance." (Taylor and Kelly 2006: 639).

As all these conceptualizations indicate, the formation and handling of discretion depends on very different aspects and is, thus, a quite complex process. It could also be argued that the boundaries between sources of discretions and ways of dealing with it are fluid. In this sense, discretion not only depends on how it is determined by external factors such as regulations and organisational aspects, but discretion as room for situated decisions and agency is also shaped by understandings and interpretations of individual actors. The active exertion of discretion might also depend on interpretations and practices frontline workers associate to their position and role as well as on different professional identities and individual attitudes and beliefs. In fact, as Marston (2013) underlines for the context of activation studies, there have been further conceptual refinements of the street-level bureaucracy approach with a stronger analytical focus on the attitudes and actions of frontline workers. There are, for example, different studies from the US that highlight how street-level bureaucrats deter people from making claims on the state (De-Parle 2004), challenge or adopt racist sterotypes (Watkin-Hayes 2009, 2013) or apply sanctions in ways that reinforce societal race and class divisions (Soss et al. 2012).

Very recently, Dunn (2013) triggered a vivid debate on views and experiences of people who work with unemployed people. Based on a qualitative study with a sample of forty employment advisers in the UK, Dunn's provocative contribution highlights the viewpoint of the interviewed frontline workers that many clients "remained unemployed because they were choosy in the jobs they were willing to undertake" (Dunn 2013: 799) and their endorsement of the view "that a 'dependency culture' exists in households and neighbourhoods that have experienced joblessness for several generations" (Dunn 2013: 799). Without getting into detail of some questionable assumptions of individualistic and cultural explanations of unemployment on which Dunn bases his arguments, the interesting aspect in this context is that he calls "for opening up the employment policy debate to the views of other actors, particularly those at the front-line of activation policies" (Marston 2013: 819). This is, indeed, also acknowledged by Marston in his contesting reply to Dunn. But as Marston makes the point, "simply because a sample of workers believe a culture of dependency is widespread, it does not follow that this justifies current policy parameters – as to do so would conflate the views of workers with the views of the unemployed. Indeed,

some workers probably need to be challenged on their views about the unemployed, in the same way that employers need to be encouraged to employ older workers, people with disabilities or single parents. Arguably, the disciplinary welfare gaze needs to be turned on its head and focused backwards to the state, employers and front-line workers. And in explaining why these workers might have these views we should look at the conditions of their work, their caseloads, their employment conditions and the level of resources they have at their disposal to invest in people to help them make the transition from unemployment to a decent job." (Marston 2013: 824). Similarly, also Wright (2013) critisises Dunn in her reply, not only for completely neglecting the harmful effects of unemployment when speaking about attitudes towards employment and job search motivations, but also for the missing contextualisation of his account. Wright (2012, 2013) higlights that frontline workers have to be seen as active moral agents which "mediate transitions between unemployment and employment through social processes of interactional accomplishment" (Wright 2013: 832). Wright calls attention to the fact, that „(t)hese processes are, by definition social. Thus shared moral frameworks, including popularised anti-welfare myths, are as likely to inform the world views of activation workers as they are of anyone else sharing a context in which attitudes have been hardening (...) to offer diminishing support for unemployed people and benefit recipients (...). However, ‚activation workers' are situated uniquely in being able to apply these views in live interaction with unemployed people. In this situated social context, belief in stigmatising anti-welfare myths takes on a new potency, with the capacity to convert social suffering into direct emotional and psychological penalites (...). Thus, the unfounded belief in ‚chosen worklessness' and ‚third generation' ‚dependency' constitutes an additional layer of re-moralisation that occurs at implementation level and my result in direct discrimination and disempowerment." (Wright 2013: 832). In this sense, also Wright welcomes a perspective which provides insights into the role of powerful actors engaged in the implementation of activation policies. In this context, „the analysis of what street-level workers believe and how these believes influence their daily interactive practices with users is essential to understanding how contemporary social rights and responsibilities are mediated. It is essential that continued study of the motivations and actions of frontline workers and their clients is conducted rigorously and contextualised accurately within contemporary socio-economic, political, policy and labour market contexts." (Wright 2013: 835).

In a nutshell, it can be summarised that research findings are consistent in acknowleding the implementation behaviour of street-level bureaucrats as an important

aspect of policy implementation and in pointing out that discretionary leeway in street-level practice, although appraised in different ways, has an important impact on the countours and divergences of policy implementation (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003, Ricucci, Meyers, Lurie and Han 2004, Ricucci 2005, Gofen 2013). Moreover, it has been highlighted that policy emphases of frontline workers depend on their overall „policy dispositions“ (May and Winter 2007: 453) which result both from understandings of policy goals and evaluations but also from professional knowledge and very personal attitudes and worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) (May and Winter 2007, Hill 2003, Berg 2006, Wright 2012, 2013, Marston 2013). However, although different authors have emphasised the aspect of frontline workers' professional socialisation and identities for their understanding of their work and responsibilities in the policy context and, thus, also for their ways of handling discretion (Hill 2003, Berg 2006), in the context of activation these aspects are still unconsidered to a large extent and a debate on the professionalisation of "activation work" is still, at least in the mainstream debate on activation work, rather marginal (van Berkel et al. 2012).

Anyway, there are different contributions which discuss the impacts of public services reforms on the role and the professional identities of frontline workers. Berg (2006), for example, investigates the interdependence between organisational and management forms and professional and individual identities combining conceptual work with evidence from the study of three Norwegian public services. Based on Douglas' idea (1996), that strategies and choices made by individual actors are not just individual matters but part of collective state of minds belonging to cultural environments of action individual actors are part of, Berg identifies different cultural alternatives of action and communities of meaning in organisations and underlines that attitudes and preferences are not individual but contextual and that „choices made by individuals are not private choices or roles played according to personal whims. They are contextual choices – they are ways to manoeuvre in an existing structure of opportunities, and they are political choices – as the individual accepts or rejects values tied to perceptions of what a good organization and a good society are." (Berg 2006: 560). Berg then links the notion of collective identities with the level of organisational preferences. Referring to Considine and Lewis (1999), Berg identifies different governance types and bureaucratic rationalities and infers which organisational preferences appeal to which collective identities. Against this background, Berg shows that the transformation of public services towards market based and private sector management models challenges traditional professional cultures and indentities in public services. Important positive properties of the traditional public servant are increasingly threatened and new values and

demands require a new mind-set of the public workforce. In this sense, Berg argues that the public sector will on the one hand attract new types of employees and, on the other one, both provoke scepticism and resistance and start processes of re-socialisation and change of communities of meaning in organisations.

In a similar way, Røysum (2013) discusses the development of social workers' role in the context of the reform of welfare services in Norway. The core element of the reform has been the introduction of one-stop-shops intended to solve the challenge of poorly coordinated public agencies and fragmented services and to reduce this way also passive economic transfers. These new offices incorporate all state-funded social and employment services and their different support programmes. Roysum points out how this one-stop principle is not a mere organisational issue but that it entails also the simplification and standardisation of ways of thinking, „in sense of ‚one way of thinking'" (Røysum 2013: 720), among employees. In this sense, Røysum critically discusses the dilemma of how to combine „one-stop service principles as a generalist ‚light' approach" (Røysum 2013: 708) with complex situations and special competencies of a professional social work background. Social workers are faced with increased standardisations and less professional autonomy in their work and services, in the end, risk to be less flexible, individualised and integrated and to rather concentrate on supporting the shortest route into paid employment without taking into account personal circumstances and needs.

Against the background active welfare state reforms in the Netherlands, van Berkel et al. (2010) explore the role of frontline workers in four local welfare agencies focussing specifically on frontline staff involved in activating social assistance recipients. Van Berkel et al. investigate how active welfare state reforms have influenced discretionary spaces at the frontline of local welfare agencies, how discretion is managed and how frontline workers cope with it. The findings suggest that frontline work in local welfare agencies is subject to considerable change and that „(i)ncreased discretion is an importanat element of this process of change, even though it is constrained and conditioned in several ways. Local welfare agencies operate under a financial regime that strongly stimulates gate-keeping and social assistance exits. Resources are often scarce, caseloads and workloads are sometimes high and furthermore, frontline workers need capacities and skills to carry out their tasks, which is not self-evident as many are trained as benefit administrators. In using their room for discretion, frontline workers need to find a balance between clients' needs, organisational, financial and work conditions, and their own perceptions of their role and professional identities." (van Berkel et al. 2010: 460). Van Berkel et al. identify different frontline work

identities. Some workers are oriented by a bureaucratic attitude and see their task in the consequent and strict application of the given rules. Other frontline workers are less rule and more goal oriented. Their focus lies on the realization of the policy goal to integrate clients in the labour market. Accordingly, rules and regulations are understood first and foremost as a means to the overall policy goals and used in a more flexible way. Still other frontliners have a more protective attitude towards their clients. They are classified as care workers who are less exclusively focused on labour market integration and „consider the notion of individual client responsibility as problematic“ (van Berkel et al. 2010: 459). Besides these individual differences in the orientations and interpretations of frontliners, the intersting point highlighted is, however, „a clear though not unambiguos shift from a bureaucratic towards a more professional treatment of frontline workers combined with attempts to introduce a more performance oriented style of management.“ In this sense, van Berkel et al. relate to Noordegraaf's (2007) work on professionalism in ambiguos public domains, pointing out that frontline workers are transformed from traditional policy administrators into so called hybrid professionals or, as van Berkel et al. put it, into „professionals without a profession“. Van Berkel et al. observe that, on the one hand, professionalisation is becoming more important as an issue in frontline work. On the other hand, they remain careful in their interpretation of this new trend and somehow point out a lack of professionalism which not only makes activation work a rather individual project for frontline workers but entails also severe risks for clients. As van Berkel et al. state, „(i)n the current situation, frontline workers are professionals without a profession: there is no officially recognised body of knowledge that activation frontline workers can rely on, there are no vocational associations, there is no occupationally controlled labour market, there are no systemtic processes of professional accountability. By taking the route of professionalisation in the absence of a more or less clearly defined ‚profession', welfare agencies have started a project that may involve considerable risks for the clients they are serving – and performance management will not solve this, as it exactly presupposes that frontline workers know what they should do (and are able to do so) to reintegrate unemployed people into the labour market. The emphasis on activation policy rhetoric on the obligations and inividual responsibilities of social assistance recipients may explain why the openness of regulations concerning activation and the lack of a strongly developed profession are in no way compensated for by strengthening the instruments that clients can use to exercise voice and choice, which could serve as a counterweight for their dependence on frontline workers' decisions. Whereas in other social policy sectors (education, health, etcetera) the debate on strengthening the role

of ‚users' or ‚clients' or ‚consumers' has gained momentum, it is weak when it comes to the activation of social assistance recipients. From this point of view, the professionalisation process we found in our research may be interpreted as a recognition of the work of activation frontline workers, but up until now fails to pay sufficient attention to the unemployed people who are their clients." (van Berkel et al. 2010: 462).

In a more recent publication, van Berkel and van der Aa (2012) deepen this issues and ask if activation work should be thought of as an administrative function or as a professional service provision. This very insightful contribution gives an overview on the existing literature on activation frontline work and provides a meta-analysis of two different strands of literature concerning the issue of professionalisation in this field. As van Berkel and van der Aa underline, there is broad consensus on the fact that frontline work matters, that frontliners have room to exercise discretion in providing activation services and that their ways of dealing with it influence what activation eventually means and how it affects the lives of unemployed people. However, what frontliners in activation services actually do in practice depends also on the contexts which structure activation work and which can differ notably between, but also within, countries.

Van Berkel and van der Aa (2012) try, anyway, to abstract from such contextual factors and to focus on some core characteristics of "activation work" and to examine what the literatures says about the possibilities to provide activation services in a professional way. As van Berkel and van der Aa point out, two different approaches can be distinguished in literature. The first and often rather critical approach discusses activation work using social work as the referential professional model and focusing on the question whether activation policies with their strong emphasis on individual responsibilities and obligations are compatible with professional social work standards. In this respect, van Berkel and van der Aa refer to Hasenfeld's contribution (1999) in which he explores the prospects for social work in the context of US welfare-to-work policies. Hasenfeld asks whether a social service orientation distinguished by professional values, individualised service provision and staff-client relations based on mutual trust is possible in public welfare agencies which implement employment and activation services in the US welfare-to work context. Hasenfeld comes to a rather negative conclusion pointing out that the mandatory nature of welfare to work makes a social service orientation impossible. According to Hasenfeld the professional model required for the provision of social services is compromised and corrupted by bureaucratic control and monitoring of clients and by their sanctioning in cases of non-compliance. These circumstances not only jeopardise a belief system based on professional values and the

provision of services which account for individual situations but also make it hard to establish relations of mutual trust between frontline staff and clients.[31] Similar critiques and arguments are echoed by a variety of studies on "activation work" which point out the tension frontline workers experience between the compulsory nature of activation programmes and the use of sanctions as the source of a bureaucratic and rule-bound rationality model on the one hand and discretionary spaces for individualised service provisions based on a professional rationality on the other one. These studies differ in their emphasis on administrative or professional elements and some contributions point out the ambivalent concomitance of both de-professionalisation and re-professionalisation processes of activation work (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012). However, many contributions are rather critical about activation work as professional activity and as a field for professional social work. As van Berkel and van der Aa make the point, „(m)onitoring and sanctioning unemployed people are considered incompatible with a professional work (or, at least, social work) repertoire, which makes the prospects of the social work profession rather gloomy given the incrasing emphasis in social policies on obligations, sanctions, reciprocity and individual responsibilities" (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012: 497). Anyway, although there seems to be common concern about the corruption of professional values under such circumstances and about the prospects of social work in the field of "activation work", it might be rather difficult to find general answers and outlooks on these issues. What might be of crucial importance is how these ambiguities and challenges are, eventually, dealt with. As Kjørstand reports for her study in the Norwegian context, „(t)he social workers participating in the study *do* reflect on the ambiguity of their positions. They express serious concern about the coherence of their own practices and this is a *reassuring* quality of their practice. It would have been alarming if they were thoroughly convinced by their own rationales and

[31] These issues are of crucial importance also in a more recent contribution in which Hasenfeld (2010) proposes a framework to explain the path from a policy to its outcomes. The proposed framework resembles to a Russian nested doll consisting of different shells or spheres which include „the policy design, the institutional and political economy of the local community in which the policy is implemented, the strategic choices made by the organization, the responses and adaptations of the workers, and the resulting worker-client relations and their consequences" (Hasenfeld 2010: 148). Hasenfeld applies this framework to the implemenation of the welfare reform in the US and points out that the difficult conditions of street-level work and the ensuing daily practices of workers to deal with them have significant consequnces on the well-being of clients. „Facing large caseloads, difficult clients, limited resources, pressures to meet participation requirements and to reduce the welfare rolls, workers develop their own set of routines to adapt to these constraints. Typically, these routines give greater emphasis to completing paper work over attention to the clients; limit interest in the client biography; typify the clients into a few pre-determined categories; route them into prescribed and predictable service trajectories; provide the minimally needed monitoring; and give preferences to "good" clients while penalizing those who make demands on their time." (Hasenfeld 2010: 159f).

practices and if they spoke categorically about the sufficiency of their own professional and moral activities. One of the great challenges of social work under the policy of workfare is being able to tackle several interconnected practices and rationalities simultaneously.“ (Kjørstad 2005: 395). What makes it additionally difficult to speak about the outlooks for “activation work” as a professional activity and as a field for social work, is the fact that these isseus can be hardly discussed in an abstract way and without accounting for contextual factors. The nature of “activation work” and the challenges and dilemmas frontline workers have to face highly depend on the effective mix of adminstrative and professional elements and the decision-making rationalities underliying the use of discretion in practice. These issues again are not only defined by formal conceptualisations of “activation work” or its interpretations on the basis of both individual attitudes and professional identities. They are strongly determined also by the contingencies of the organisational context and the management styles applied. High caseloads, lacking time for clients and scarce resources for adequate services can make it hard for activation workers to provide personalised services and to work according professional standards (Hasenfeld 2010). Moreover, strategies of performance management may increase administrative workload and induce a shift from professional responsibilities towards managerial acountability and, thus, induce „strategies where activation workers try to realise quick wins, by focusing their time and resources on people that are considered as easy to reintegrate in the labour market“ (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012: 502). In sum, contextual factors such as organisational conditions and management models „may put professional activation work under pressure and may elicit administrative coping strategies among activation workers“ (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012: 502). Furthermore, “activation work” may also not even be understood or conceptualised as a professional activity or as „social work“. In fact, the educational and occupational background of frontline workers in activation services varies across different country contexts and different local welfare agencies and Public Employment Services. In some context frontline workers used to be benefit administrators, in other contexts they used to be social workers or they belong to other occupational groups, very often without clear professional profiles or trained in special in-house trainings.

This ambiguous situation is also reflected in the literature on the practice of activation Although there are some contributions that explicitly discuss frontline work in activation services as a field for professional social work, it has to be pointed out that also in literature “activation work” is discussed and framed very differently. Very often the look on frontline activation work is informed mainly by a policy implementation or a programme

administration perspective rather than by an explicit social work perspective. Such contributions do acknowledge the crucial role of frontline work for the implementation of activation policies and they deal with the dilemmas of street-level work referring to Lipsky's street level bureaucracy approach. However, in this perspective the discussion often remains rather constricted to questions that are functional to policy implementation and the organisation of programme administration without explicitly addressing a value perspective and engaging with dilemmas from a professional (social work) perspective. At the same time also the contributions from a social work perspective are not really abundant. Although there has been a general debate on social work in the context of the activating state (Kessl and Otto 2002, Dahme et al. 2003), empirical accounts of what is occurring on the frontline of activation services remain fairly rare also in a critical social work debate. This might indeed have to do with the ambiguity of activation work, its ensnarement with programme administration and its predominant framing as administrative activity in many contexts. What happens there is often neither framed nor recognised as social work, maybe also with good cause. However, what happens at the frontline of activation services is increasingly important as activation has become the main linchpin for welfare state intervention and as it is there that rights and obligations of citizens are spelled out, contracted and called in. Thus, social work would be well advised to engage more strongly with the practice of activation work, even more as social work does not only have a tradition in the context of labour market and employment policy (Böhnisch and Schröer 2005) but as a social work perspective could, due to its very nature of being a social profession, make a valid contribution to the ongoing debate on activation work as a highly ambigous (professional) field.

However, what is particularly interesting is that van der Berkel and van der Aa (2012) identify a second approach in the literature that speaks of activation work as a „new" profession. This strand of literature points out that activation workers are on the one hand increasingly expected to act in a professional way, but that on the other one the development of activation work as a new profession is both substantially as well as institutionally still in its infancy. Following a Freidson (2001) approach to professionalism as a logic of organising work where professionals autonomously control their own work, this approach argues in favour of strengthening the professional status of activation workers by taking the route of a traditional modell of professionalisation. In this sense, Sainsbury (2008) argues that activation work should be established „as a profession, with accredited training and qualifications, a code of conduct and registration with a regulatory body responsible for

maintaining professional standards“ (Sainsbury 2008: 336). Similarly other authors speak about activation workers as pre-professionals (Jorgensen et al. 2010) or, as aforementioned, professionals without profession (van Berkel et al 2010). Van Berkel et al. (2010) underline the missing professional status of activation work and point out its lacking characteristics of an established profession such as an offcially recognised body of knowledge, an organised professional community and a system of professional accountability. But van Berkel et al. point out that it is not a conincidence that the professionalisation of frontline work is not considered by approaches which focus mainly on the management of discretion, „as professionalism is often seen as a part of the problem of, rather than the solution for, the management of discretion“ (van Berkel et al. 2010: 491). Anyway, van Berkel and van der Aa argue for a better recognition of activation work and underline the importance of a professionaisation project in this field as activation work turns out to be a rather individual project also for frontline workers and as clients risk to be at the mercy of activation workers and practices which are unpredictable and of lacking transparency. Furthermore, van Berkel and van er Aa (2012) highlight the importance of activation work also in relation to the effectiveness of activation and point out that a professional design of activation work could have positive impacts „in terms of the attitude of workers towards clients, in terms of personalised attention, in terms of the process of matching clients with services, in terms of dealing with sanctions, and in terms of contacts with employers“ (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012: 505). But at the same time van Berkel and van der Aa point out that a debate on the professionalisation of activation work has just started and that the feasibility of professionalisation processes in this field is highly contested. But van Berkel and van der Aa sustain that individualised, personalised and tailor-made service provision is the key to sucessful activation services and, thus, they make a strong appeal for the professionalisation of activation work but, as they make the point, „this may remain a rather gratuitos appeal when policy makers and managers do not invest in developing this profession and in facilitating the conditions for professional work, and when the nature of activation work and the activation profession do not acquire a more prominent place on the reserach agenda of social policy scholars.“(van der Berkel and va der Aa 2012: 507)

2.6. Which professionalism for "activation work" as a practice of citizenship?

However, the emphasis on the importance of activation work and the appeal as well as the different ideas about its professionalisation raise some further questions on the very nature of activation work and on different ideas of professionalism that might be more or less suitable for a professinal design of activation work. Van Berkel and van der Aa (2012) rightly raise the question wheter activation policies, especially due to their obligatory and disciplining characteristic, make the professional organisation of activation work impossible from the very outset. Based on the two different approaches van Berkel and van der Aa identify in the literature, they underline that the authors who use traditional social work as the point of reference are at the best rather skeptical about the possibilities of a professionisation project in activation work if not excluding it properly. Other authors, however, "come to a different conclusion and argue in favour of a further development and institutionalization of the activation profession" (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012: 506). But how should such an activation profession look like? And which are the ideas about a profession and about professionalism that inform the perspective that argues for the institutionalization of an activation profession? As van Berkel and van der Aa themselves give to concern "(a)part from the issue whether activation work *can* be designed as a profession, the nature of the profession *itself* is still unclear and in need of being elaborated" (van Berkel and van der Aa 2012: 506f).

The argument here is that this question cannot be addressed abstracting from contextual factors and that the idea of a "new" activation profession might not really hit the mark or even risk to follow an idea of professionalisation which is less suitable for the ambivalent field of activation. On the one hand it is both understandable and legitimate to take the route of establishing a more specialised profile of activation work intended to promote its respectability in professional terms by claiming an area of expertise and competence and to delimit in this way practice from arbitrariness and contingency. But on the other hand, it seems that proponents of this idea are less aware about the limits this classical idea of expertocratic professionalisation cannot but encounter in all fields in which service provison is closely linked to the ways criteria for social solidarity and welfare are defined and in which every professional activity is, eventually, inevitably linked to the definition of rights and duties as concretion of social citizenship.

In this sense, the argumentation here is that the social work profession and its struggles with the notion of professionalism might very well serve as a referential model for

dealing with the difficulties and challenges of activation work and for pursuing the idea of professionalisation in this highly ambiguous domain. In fact, as the history of the social work profession in its diverse configurations and societal contexts clearly shows, the professionalisation process of social work had always to deal with tensions and ambiguities which made it particularly different for social work to develop an unambiguos and universally transferable identity. These difficulties have often been interpreted as a lack of professionalism and the history of social work has seen different attempts to overcome these difficulties by emphasizing value neutrality and scientific detachment and by tracing out a clearer demarcation both to other professions and to other non professional activities (Lorenz 2001, 2006). But as Lorenz clearly points out, exactly these difficulties and the openness of social work qualifies it as a social profession "that has always yet to be defined in the exact circumstances in which it is being practiced. Perhaps it is appropriately ambiguos because the 'social' is always the space in which ambiguities emerge, get negotiated, give rise to a dominant discourse only to get subverted again. The 'social' is the space that social work always had to negotiate, no matter how much it wanted to get away from this dangerous and insecure intersection of contrary forces and from the firing line of public criticism. But there is no secure place for a profession that has 'the social' as its mandate, in contrast to, for instance, counselling and therapy, where those forces can be eliminated or at least ingnored to a much greater extent. Social work can only address and to eventually fulfil its social mandate if it maintains this degree of openness, if it can sustain uncertainty and ambiguity, with all the risks that it entails." (Lorenz 2001: 12) Accordingly, Lorenz advocates for an open professional model in social work pointing out that the success such a model in practice "relates to the degree to which it can negotiate, rather than resolve, a series of tensions, conflicts and contradictions" (Lorenz 2001: 13). Social work has its domain of intervention where the public and the private meet and interact and where social bonds have to be negotiated. As a social profession social work is rooted in and committed to both private and the public sphere and this field of tension between the private and the political constitutes an essential characteristic of social work and part of every frontline social work experience. This means that social work "has to negotiate between a political perspective on welfare which relates its activities ultimately to the state, and one which regards welfare primarily as the concern of private individuals" (Lorenz 2001: 13). It is in these processes that the commitment to both the private and the political has to be substantiated and that the social as the core mode of operating in social work has to be demonstrated. Exactly therein also lies the political nature of social work. As Lorenz makes the point, "(t)he political nature of

social work practice is borne out not so much in political campaigning (…), but in giving a direct, personal interactions with service users a 'citizenship dimension' so that they become an element in the recreation of social solidarity as inter-locking networks of rights and obligations." (Lorenz 2006: 174). This conception of social work as a practice of citizenship "cannot be detached from the political arguments over different ways of securing social solidarity, and indeed it has to be a voice in those disputes, no matter how tempting it might be to withdraw and to leave those arguments to politicians" (Lorenz 2001: 23). According to such an understanding, the professionalisation of social work cannot simply follow the path of carving out a detached area of proper competence but has do develop a notion of professionalism that engages with policy ideas, organisational structures and practices which determine the constraints and possibilities for a practice of citizenship.

In this sense, it turns out clearly that the ongoing debate on social work's professional identity is not only an academic extravagance or an autoreferential end in itself. Rather it is a necessary debate that must go along with the search of contingent and contextualised answers and, thus, promote a reflexive practice, which is aware about its impacts, its dilemmas and its limits and tries to face, to shape and to negotiate them (Fargion 2009). In fact, in social work there is a broad body of literature which picks up the idea of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1984) and which discusses different concepts of reflection, critical reflection and reflexivity in relation to social work practice (Sheppard 1998, White 1997, Taylor and White 2001, 2006, Sicora 2005, Kessl 2009, for an overview on the existing literature and approaches see also White et al. 2006 and D'Cruz et al. 2007). Without going into detail of this debate, it is highlighted with Fook and Askeland that critical reflection has the specific purpose "to expose or unsettle dominant assumptions with the expressed purpose of challenging and changing dominant power relations" (Fook and Askeland 2006: 47). Fook and Askeland develop their approach to critical reflection based on notions from critical theory and from Foucauldian theorising regarding power providing a framwork for the "analysis of how people make (and remake) themselves in relation to social context and structure. And how they gain a sense of personal power or agency in this process. In this sense, (…) the aim of critical reflection, or what makes the reflection critical, is the allowing of more control and choice in individual lives through the exposure of dominant social assumptions (which had partly maintained their power through their hidden operation)." (Fook and Askeland 2006: 53). Other authors use the concept of reflexivity to highlight the importance of critical self-reflection on the impact of own positions, backgrounds, assumptions, feelings and behaviour while attending at the same time to the

impact of the wider ideological, discursive political and organisational context (D'Cruz et al. 2007, Finlay and Gough 2003). In this sense, what is proposed for social work is the idea of a reflexive professionalisation (Dewe 2009, Otto et al. 2009, Dewe and Otto 2012,) which points out that social workers, in addition to their own knowledge and methodical tools, have to keep in mind social norms, social conflicts and social problems that are mirrored in practice by every concrete single „case". Such an understanding of professionalism is open to different forms of knowledge and to a democratic rationale, which seems important for a professional activity which "derives its mandate always from being based and linked in the way in which society, not a group of experts, collectively defines, often in a most contradictory way, criteria of well being, social integration, social solidarity and hence the conditions under which society can only exist" (Lorenz 2006: 11). Otto and Ziegler (2006) highlight the importance of reflexive professionalism both for realising the democratic potential of social work practice and, thus, for its own legitimacy as well as for contrasting the replacement of professionalism by practices and techonologies which refer merely to the functionings of clients and service users in an apolitical way. This understanding of professionalism comes close to ideas and concepts coined, such as civic professionalism (Sullivan 2004), activist professionalism (Sachs 2000) or democratic professionalism (Dzur 2004, Kremer and Tonkens 2006, Tonkens et al. 2013), which „imply varying efforts to articulate and promote a further democratisation of the relationship between professionals and service users" (Tonkens and Newmann 2011: 206). All these concepts try to adapt the notion of professionalism linking it up "with the demand for the democratization of service delivery and the criticism of professionalism while still preserving the core characteristic of representing public values" (Nothdurfter and Lorenz 2010: 53). In this sense, they share the Freidsonite approach to professionalism as different both from bureaucracy and from the market in its commitment to the public good while acknowledging at the same time that knowledge and skills are not owned exclusively by professionals. Knowledge and skills rather "become the object of a democratic dialogue. Democracy itself becomes a value to be promoted by professionals. This means that the development, the maintenance and the exchange of knowledge remain at the heart of professional activities, but their application has to be the result of processes of democratic exchange in order to enhance the openness and the accountability of professional practice." (Nothdurfter and Lorenz 2010: 54).

In this sense, the suggestion here is that the debate on the professionalisation of activation work should be probably be skeptical about conceptualsing activation too hastily as a "new" profession. Rather it could be wery well informed by a critical stance and a

critical debate on professionalism under changing socio-political circumstances as it is developed not least in the social work literature. Kessl (2009), e.g., connects the idea of critical reflexivity in social work with the new (or post-) welfare agenda which focuses on the subject „in a new way as a single, responsible, individual unit (the client) or collective entity (the family or the community)“ (Kessl 2009: 310). Relying strongly on behavioural concepts and pedagogical terms this agenda is intended to activate „all the reproductive potential available to the 'subjects' regardless of their degree of social participation“ (Kessl 2009: 310). Against this background Kessl invites to look how social work practice reproduces given political rationalities and which strategies undermine or open spaces of action both for professionals and service users. As Kessl states, „(t)he theoretical and empirical answers to these questions can show the boundaries of the existing, the construction plan of each (delivery) situation. Critical reflexive social work, with a tradition of being sensitive to these boundaries and with the capacity of enlarging and undermining them with a view to opening up spaces of action for users, would be the best professional, reflexive agency imaginable.“ (Kessl 2009: 315). Also Lorenz urges for a professional approach in social work which seeks to reverse the trends towards the privatisation of responsibilities and highlights the social domain where the private and the public meet and interact as its proper area of intervention. As Lorenz points out, „(t)he withdrawal of the state from a commitment to this social domain makes it even more necessary for social work to emphasise the importance of a public sphere in the resolution of all social problems, even when they present themselves initially as totally private.” (Lorenz 2006: 175).

It turns out clearly, that applying such an understanding on "activation work" has to look both on the conditions of street-level practice and the orientations of practitioners, which contribute or inhibit a participatory dimension of practice in which the public and the private can be related to each other by overcoming a strict active/passive divide and by seeing unemployed and welfare claiming people not only as silent or passive objects but still as citizens who can make their voice heard and as "active agents, capable of exercising power and affecting their own welfare and well-being" (Johansson and Hvinden 2013: 48). As Matthies (2009) points out, "(w)elfare service professionals can both enable and hinder participation of marginalised citizens. They can strengthen the identity of active citizenship and enable collective action, mutual networks and self-organisation among service users. But social workers can be instrumentalised for useless programmes of activation in the name of the integration of marginalised people. Some projects allow only limited, harmless types of preplanned participation, and professionals can in any case discourage people with

repressive interventions or with accounts of citizens' disinterest or incompetence." (Matthies 2009: 330f). Applying the concepts of subject and subjectivisation as treated by Adorno, Matthies points out that social workers (but maybe all frontline workers in welfare services) are fighting with a constant dilemma between objectivisation and subjectivistaion and that they are always exposed to the risk of negelecting the contradictions that exist between 'the real' and 'the possible' and of working towards manipulation instead of subjectivisation. "Subjectivisation refers to the process of becoming a subject, a fully responsible, autonomously thinking and acting adult citizen, as opposed to a manipulated and system-functioning object." (Matthies 2009: 319). If welfare professionals are oriented towards enabling people to become the subjects of their lives this means also that „(t)hose societal and institutional mechanisms that entail hidden or open forms of pressure and hinder a free process of becoming a subject have to be identified. Subjects have to be able to identify and deal with the basic contradictions in their environment in order to process changes in these. Social work must aim to support full citizenship of individuals, who are able to resist manipulative influences." (Matthies 2009: 323) Matthies points pout that subjectivisation must not be seen only as an idealistic goal but that it is an indispensable precondition for the effectiveness of social work which can reach ist clients only on the basis of participatory and subject-directed approaches and which requires a dialogue between professionals and service users to open up perspectives for what is possible, especially in situations that appear closed and hopeless. In this sense, Matthies underlines that „the subjectivisation of citizens is not only their right or an indicator for progressive professionalism, but even a necessary pre-condition for a more just welfare policy." (Matthies 2009: 319). As Matthies argues, the knowledge of social workers and other street-level professionals has not been systematically used for the development of policies. This could be, however, a promising perspective for the further professional development not only for social work in a very strict sense, but for all professional activities at the frontline of welfare services and, thus, also for activation work. „Bringing in street level knowledge as the result of a dialectic and democratic dialogue between those who implement social policy strategies and the respective target groups of service users could become an promising strategy to overcome a reductionist, managerial and instrumental 'what works' agenda and to develop more effective, more accurate and probably more just social policies." (Nothdurfter and Lorenz 2010: 56).

The interesting point in looking on frontline work in activation services and in exploring the possibilities of its professionalisation is, thus, to look on constraints and possibilities for activation work as a practice of citizenship. In their work on social

professionals' perceptions of activating citizenship, Sirotkina and van Ewijk (2010) point out, that social workers are committed to the idea of activation but also to promoting participation and supporting citizens. Social workers agree on what Sirotkina and van Ewijk label as personalised citizenship. "Personalised citizenship implies that citizenship is not a fixed standard to discriminate between full citizens and socially, physically or mentally handicapped citizens. Responsibility, rights and duties are universal but different in different contexts, different for different people. The idea of self responsibility and social responsibility does not imply that for certain citizens and in certain contexts professional support is excluded; on the contrary, social support creates a more equal level playing field and supports the most vulnerable people, neighbourhoods, counties, groups to participate to their own capabilities." (Sirotkina and van Ewijk 2010: 88). Duffy (2010) advocates for an inclusive model of citizenship which should underpin the meaning of personalisation for social workers. He proposes a citizenship theory of social justice based on three main principles. The first one states that "a fair society is one where all its members treat each other with respect, that is, as equal citizens" (Duffy 2010: 261). Duffy underlines that the idea of being equal citizens goes beyond holding the same passport and has a much deeper sense, namely of equally possessing those qualities that call forth an attitude of respect. In this context, Duffy underlines that citizenship is not a naturalistic but a genuine social concept, which means that society itself defines and redefines the parameters of citizenship. A citizenship theory of social justice "invites society to make a positive definition of citizenship, one that can iself be used to ensure the positive inclusion of those who are most likely to face discrimination, prejudice or disadvantage" (Duffy 2010: 261). This leads to the second main principle of Duffy's theory, namely that "a fair society ensures that the grounds for respect (the keys to citizenship) are so defined that everyone can achieve citizenship, and thus be respected as equal" (Duffy 2010: 261). Duffy argues for an inclusive, positive, sustainable and realistic account of citizenship and, coming to the third main principle of his framework, he points ot that society has to organize itself in a way that everyone gets the assistance needed to achieve this account of citizenship. As Duffy states, "a fair society organises itself so that everyone gets sufficient support to be able to achive effective citizenship" (Duffy 2010: 263). Against this background, personalisation in service provision has to be understood first and foremost as sustaining and strengthening people in their citizenship which means giving people the chance to be treated as citizens who have an equal right to get the level of support needed to effectively achieve citizenship. Thinking about personalisation this way shows that personlisation can not only be understood as

something laid down in a series of externally defined policies which come down to practice as rules for equal distribution or equal treatmnet of people. Rather personlisation has to be understood as initimately bound with the nature of social work practice which critically embraces technologies and indeed finds ways to make them work and to improve them against the background of an understanding of citizenship not only as a status, but also as a practice and, eventually, as a matter of social justice.

Newman and Tonkens (2011) look on participation, responsibility and choice as key policy framings of active citizenship summonging citizens to take on new roles in the context of new welfare policies. Their book collects contributions, which trace the emergence of new formations of active citizenship in different contexts. These contributions examine what happens as struggles from below meet new governmental discourses in the context of welfare services reform and suggest different ways policies, enactments and meanings of active citizenship interact in specific sites. This perspective particularly takes account of different meanings and practices of active citizenship pointing out shifting reponsibilities, identifications and experiences, not at least in the transformations between professionals and service users. Tonkens and Newman (2011) point out that the notion of active citizenship challenges a traditional understanding of professionals and has "repercussions for what it means to be a service professional" (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 201). The notion of active citizenship took place also against a background of growing skepticisms and critiques of professional power and and of promotion of the idea that the power of citizens, also as service users, should be enhanced. However, as Tonkens and Newman underline, there are many positions which express "skepticism about the empowerment of citizens under the banner of active citizenship: rather than a real shift in the relationship between citizens and professionals, active citizenship is charged with giving shelter to new forms of manipulation, control and boxing in" (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 202). In this sense, Tonkens and Newman argue that the claim for a shift towards greater centrality of service users and less power for professionals is way too simple. "Power between citizens and professionals is not like a ball that can be passed over from one to the other: authority and expertise are not handed over but have multiplied and at the same time they have become more conditional. Moreover there are crucial variations in the conditionality and multiplication of that authority and expertise." (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 203). Against this background, Tonkens and Newman discuss three different regimes of professionalism and of the professional-user relationship. The first one is the classical regime of professionalism in which the centrality of service users "merely means a stress on

professionals working for the sake of the client or the patient, as their professional vocations continue to demand" (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 204). Thus, in this regime it is not foreseen that service users assume an active role and critical issues of knowledge and power are not addressed, or as Tonkens and Newman make the point, "the 'knowledge-power knot' remains tightly tied" (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 204). In a second regime, professionals are seen mainly as negotiators required to negotiate with service users who are empowered through mechanisms of voice and choice. This regime is based on the notions of the independent and competent service user and a clear shift of power and knowledge from professionals to service users. In this regime the role of professionals is limited to the brokering of solutions. However, as Tonkenes and Newman underline, this regime does not take account of situations in which service users do not have the possibilities for voice and choice and it excludes those who are too vulnerable or lack the necessary competences to negotiate. As a third regime of the professional-user relationship Tonkens and Newman discern a regime of reflexive cooperation. This regime comes close to ideas of democratic professionalism outlined above, as it "maintains that professionals and citizens occupy different positions, while simultaneously stressing the need to renew and particularly democratise the relations between professionals and citizens" (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 206f) and "retains the orthodox values of professionalism such as expertise, autonomy and altruism, but (…) politicises the practices in which professionals striving for these values are involved" (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 207). This understanding of professionalism as reflexive cooperation offers a reframing of the knowledge-power knot by recognising the expertise and agency of both professionals and services users and by critically addressing issues of power and authority in frontline encounters and professional-user relationships. In this sense, it requires from professionals more than a discrete body of knowledge and technical competences and skills. Reflexive cooperation demands also an inquisitive and critical attitude of professionals as citizens. Tonkens and Newman highlight that the regime of reflexive cooperation overcomes the binary relationship between professionals as agents of the state and users as more or less active citizens by recognizing also professionals as citizens. As Tonkens and Newman argue, "'frontline' workers have themselves to be considered as citizens. They have to judge how to act in areas of ambiguity and use both their professional ethos and their political values in making such judgements (…). They sometimes silently subvert policy subscriptions, using their discretion to 'translate' policies to suit local contexts or to privilege particular goals. They may also use the spaces of agency to assert the values of care against (…) managerial logics" (Tonkens and Newman 2011:

210f). In this view, frontline workers themselves are citizens who dispose of agency – and counter-agency (Prior 2009) – they can use in order to develop strategies of revision, resistance and refusal when they are faced with the implementation of policies whose effects they consider as harmful or iniquitous. In these sense, Tonkens and Newman emphasize "that we need to pay attention to professional workers as both active and activist citizens and take seriously their responsibilities as the carriers of public values. They are confronted with new ethical and moral choices concerning their dedication to serve service users and/or the public good; to weigh conflicting demands of efficiency, cost-containment and maximizing their 'production' against the demands to serve the public good." (Tonkens and Newman 2011: 213).

3. ON THE FRONTLINE OF ACTIVATION SERVICES

Exploring (professional) challenges on the frontline of Public Employment Services

3.1. The research context

The empirical part of this work consists in a research project undertaken on the frontline of Public Employment Services in the city of Vienna in Austria and in the city of Milan in Italy. Before addressing the research design and the respective methodological considerations, the following paragraphs give a brief overview on active labour market policies both in Austria and in Italy and on the situation of Public Employment Services in the two cities of Vienna and Milan.

3.1.1. Active labour market policies in Austria

As it has been already pointed put, Austria is one of the Continental countries with a strong tradition in the promotion of vocational training and in this sense with a tradition of applying tools of active policy long before the activation turn (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004). In fact, the history of active labour market policy in Austria is officially depicted as dating back to 1959 when first concepts of guidance and training measures aimed to reduce seasonal unemployment and to create new jobs had been developed (BMASK 2013a). During the 1960s, not least against the background of growing demands of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (*ÖGB*) and of the 1964 OECD recommendations and the 1964/1965 OECD inspection report, a stronger emphasis and a reconsideration of labour market policy as an important policy area both for economic development and social protection had been established. 1968 the Labour Market Promotion Act (*Arbeitsmarkförderungsgesetz*) was approved by the Austrian Parliament to become law in 1969. It redirected the aim of the Austrian labour market policy to reduce unemployment and to follow a full employment policy based on the logic of active measures. Furthermore it addressed also the governance structure of Austria's Public Employment Services. The PES remained under direct ministerial jurisdiction but the collaboration with the social partners at all governance levels was actively solicited and institutionalised by the government. This commitment to full employment policy could be held up during the following Kreisky era

(1970 – 1983), an era of general expansion of the welfare state in Austria. During this period the government was able to keep unemployment consistently low and to achieve exceptional employment records in Europe. However, this strong performance was rather due to Keynesian economic policies, the monetary policy which pegged the Austrian Schilling to the German Mark, moderate wage settlements, the growing tertiary sector and the introduction of the 40-hour workweek than to active measures, even though investments in these measures, such as the support in regional mobility, spending on apprenticeships, public employment projects and measures for disabled workers, had significantly increased during the 1970s (Weishaupt 2010a). With respect to female employment, Austria introduced individual taxation, extended maternal leave schemes, equalised financial transfers to families and tried to contrast the discrimination of women on the labour market, but it maintained, however, its conservative path of not expanding welfare services for child and elderly care and of not seriously questioning the traditional male breadwinner model (Tálos 2005, Weishaupt 2010a, Stelzer-Orthofer 2011).

From the early 1980s also Austria had to face new challenges of rising unemployment and of the state-led industrial sector. Keynesian policies had had detrimental effects on the national debt and could no longer be sustained while the rising unemployment turned increasingly out to be not a cyclical, but a structural challenge. Against this background an amendment of the Labour Market Promotion Act (*Arbeitsmarkförderungsgesetz*) under the Minister for Social Affairs, Alfred Dallinger, introduced a so called "experimental clause" for the use of new labour market policy instruments and laid the foundation for a turn towards stronger active labour market policies, initially targeted to specific "problem" groups such as young and long-term unemployed people. The most important development arising from this "experimental clause" had been the so called *Aktion 8000*, a programme for the creation of 8.000 new publicly subsidised jobs in the second labour market intended to serve as a bridge into regular employment in the open labour market. Another important instrument applied from the 1980s had been the creation of outplacement foundations (*Arbeitsstiftungen*), not at least to smoothen the restructuring and the privatisation of the formerly state-led industrial sector. These foundations were intended to assist workers in state of dismissal beyond mere severance payments and to support them in their job-seeking and re-training efforts. However, despite the application of these new instruments the use of active labor market policies was still rather modest throughout the 1980s and the overall Austria labour market policy continued to strongly rely on the male breadwinner model and

to even expand early exit schemes such as early retirement and disability pensions (Tálos 2005, Weishaupt 2010a, Stelzer-Orthofer 2011).

The strong turn towards activation in Austria, however, took place from the mid of the 1990s, against the background of the again rising unemployment rate, fiscal consolidation efforts, inter- and supranational influences, but also against the background of a changing political climate and the anti-welfare debate initiated by the right-wing populist *FPÖ*. The development in Austrian labour market policy since the 1990s has been characterised both by activation and restriction (Artner 2001). While the development of the income maintenance and unemployment benefit schemes in former periods had been rather ambivalent, seeing both expansions and cutbacks over time, since 1993 a more restrictive regime of benefits has persistently been introduced (Tálos 2005). These restrictions have concerned general cutbacks of benefits through new methods of calculation, a stricter access to benefits and, first and foremost, their increased conditionality depending on the individual initiative and effort to reenter employment. Accordingly a strategy of increased restrictions and sanctions in case of non-compliance has been implemented and tightened over the years. Especially under the "black-blue" coalition of *ÖVP* and *FPÖ* the political discourse stressed the non-tolerance of and the fight against the unwillingness to work (Obinger and Tálos 2006, Atzmüller 2009, Stelzer-Orthofer 2011). Accordingly, reasonability regulations have been further tightened and the systems of sanctions has been expanded and implemented more severely (Atzmüller 2009). Although in 2008 a further tightening of the reasonability regulations has taken place the, the governments of the big coalition of *SPÖ* and *ÖVP* have introduced some selective improvements of benefits and reformed the national social assistance scheme. Generally, it can be stated that from the 1990s the Austrian system of unemployment benefits has shifted, similarly to other countries, from the notion of income maintenance to a stricter regime of benefits oriented towards a conditional minimum income protection matched by increased activation measures. (Obinger and Tálos 2006, Obinger 2009, Weishaupt 2010, Stelzer-Orthofer 2011)[32].

[32] Claims for unemployment benefits can be made by those who have paid unemployment insurance benefits for an appropriate period. In order to receive benefits a person has to register in any case as seeking actively work with the AMS and as being able and willing to work. The rate of unemployment benefit *(Arbeitslosengeld)* is calculated on the basis of the previous net income rate being usually equal to 55% of this former net income. It can be, however, increased with family supplements or in accordance with the the so called standard supplementary benefit rate (*Ausgleichszulagenrichtsatz*) stipulated in the General Social Security Law (*Allgemeines Sozialversicherungsgesetz*) (from 1st January 2013: EUR 837,63). The duration of unmployment benefit payments range from 30 to a maximum of 52 weeks depending on age and employment history. After the expiry of entitlement to unemployment benefit, job-seekers can apply for means-tested unemployment assistance (*Notstandshilfe*) which combines the principles of social insurance

With respect to active labour market measures, the most important reform has been introduced in 1994 with the Public Employment Service Act (*Arbeitsmarktservicegesetz*) providing a new legal framework regarding both the normative and the organisational dimension of active labour market policies in Austria. Until 1994 the Public Employment Service constituted an integral part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. With the Public Employment Service Act the Public Employment Service was formally separated from the Ministry and a semi-autonomous, tripartite Public Employment Service Agency (*Arbeitsmarktservice, AMS*) with its own legal status as public-law service enterprise (*Dienstleistungsunternehmen öffentlichen Rechts*), its own corporate identity and management autonomy has been established. This reform marked an increase in the relevance of activation strategies and the early intervention by means of active measures to achieve quick and sustainable integration of job-seekers in non-subsidised employment (Artner 2001, Weishaupt 2009, Stelzer-Orthofer 2011). Within this context, the establishment of the *AMS* aimed at transforming the Public Employment Service from a mere employment office into a comprehensive service provider pursuing, in particular, the goals of abandoning the state monopoly in placement, of decentralising decision making processes and of increasing both the flexibility in regional deployments of resources and the better involvement of the social partners (BMASK 2013a,b). This transformation was marked also by the introduction of new public management strategies with a strong emphasis on management by objectives techniques. (Atzmüller 2009, Weishaupt 2010a, Woltran 2011, Stelzer-Orthofer 2011). It is worth mentioning that one of the main goals in this context has been the diminution of long-term unemployed, which had the effect that unemployment people have often been placed in courses and training measures shortly before their passover into the status of long-term unemployment in order to break the period of unemployment and to at least statistically reduce the long-term unemployment rate (Stelzer-Orthofer 2011). What has also to be pointed out is, that the cooperation between the Public Employment Service and local welfare offices has increased substantially. Although Austria has not seen a real merger of Public Employment Services and local welfare services by establishing one-stop offices (like, for instance, in Germany), social assistance recipients deemed as capable

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and welfare. While unemployment assistance payments are lower than previous unemployment benefits, unemployment assistance can be paid one for 52 weeks and may be also extended by application, provided that the qualifying conditions are fulfilled. However, the tightening of suitability criteria and the increased use of sanctions make and excessive use of unemployment assistance payments rather unlikely. Also social assistance recipients (people who are not entitled to unemployment benefit and assistance and who apply for the means-tested minimum income paid by local welfare agencies) who are capable of work have to register as actively seeking work with the AMS.

of working have to register at the nearest local PES office and are exposed to the same activation measures as any other job-seekers. Their performance and compliance is reported to local welfare offices which decide on the possible curtailing of social assistance, the now so called means-tested minimum income (*Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung*). (Weishaupt 2010a). [33]

Generally, with the establishment of the AMS and the stronger emphasis on active policies Austria has clearly oriented its labour market policies towards the activation paradigm giving the priority to active measures over passive benefit payments. However, this shift is interpreted differently in the literature. Some authors point out that in the Austrian context activation has, at least initially, mainly been interpreted as tightening the benefits regime and increasing the pressure on unemployed people for quick labour market integration rather than as sustainable capability promotion through training and qualification measures (Buxbaum et al. 2008, Woltran 2011). Furthermore, some authors have criticised the quality and the sense of certain training and qualification measures (Atzmüller 2009, Leibetseder and Kranewitter 2012).[34] However, while Austria traditionally spent little resources on active labour market policies, since 2000 the expenditures on active policies have notably increased. Taking in consideration its low unemployment rate,[35] Austria is even positioned well above the European average of expenditures in active labour market policies (with 0,179 of the GDP per 1% point of unemployment in 2011) (BMASK 2013b). Although current budgetary constraints might compromise the future expenditure on active labour market policies (Woltran 2011), Austria's response to the economic crisis since 2008 has seen the strong investment in active measures (together with the expansion of short-time work schemes) (OECD 2009, Weishaupt 2010a).

In a comparative perspective, Austria combines characteristics associated to different activation models and regimes showing very well the ambiguities and the double faced nature of activation. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis on a responsibility-based understanding of unemployment and on bringing benefit recipients back into the labour market as soon as possible (Atzmüller 2009). On the other hand, however, Austra has seen a strong investement in the Public Employment Service and a notable expansion of active measures for training and qualification (BMASK 2013b). In any case Austria has been identified as a European success story both with respect to employment growth (Auer 2000)

[33] For a critical analysis of disciplinary effects of Austria's social assistance policy see Leibetseder 2014.
[34] For the long-term effects of qualification measures see BMASK 2013c.
[35] With a seasonal adjusted unemployment rate of 4,8% (EUROSTAT October 2013) Austria has the lowest unemployment rate in the European Union.

as well as in relation to its combination of activation and flexicurity. Although Austria is not a typical example for a flexicurity regime (like, for instance, Denmark), it has been able, better than other Continental countries, to face employment related challenges and to combine labour market flexibility and social security, not at least through innovative partnerships between the PES and private actors (Weishaupt 2009). In this sense, Austria is often depicted as an interesting role model especially among (and for other) Continental countries (Weishaupt 2009, Obinger et al. 2010). What is particularly interesting in the context of this work is, however, the strong contractualistic trait of activation policies in Austria. Interventions place emphasis on the individual responsibility, but this orientation is matched by individualised service provision and by a crucial role of employment service practitioners who have to stipulate the contractual agreements with individual job-seekers and benefit recipients.

3.1.2. Active labour market policies in Italy

Traditionally, Italian labour market policies have been characterised by a strong garantist approach combining the traditional unemployment insurance scheme (introduced in 1919) with a strong focus on job protection and on special, strongly category-based measures of in job protection intended to avoid dismissals and, thus, to prevent unemployment. This traditional pattern of Italian labour market policies has developed from the postwar period until the early 1970s, in the context of the growing industry mainly in the North of the country and due to the strong position of workers' unions and their political achievements (hitting their peak with the enactment of the *„Statuto dei lavoratori"* (Statute of employees) in 1970 (l. n. 300/1970). However, the configuration of Italian labour market policies had been strongly category-based and, hence, very selective from the very outset (Sacchi and Vesan 2011, Vesan 2012, Calza Bini and Lucciarini 2013).

This became increasingly problematic from the early 1980s, against the background of adverse macroeconomic conditions (with the first industrial downturns in the aftermath of the oil crises) and in view of the changing structure of the labour market with a strong increase of the service sector and, thus, of employment beyond the traditional category of the industrial workers. The reaction to these new challenges in Italian labour market policy consisted however, on the one hand in the extension of the protection in the job (or in case of

collective dismissals) and in the creation of early exit possbilities.[36] On the other hand, since the 1990s main labour market reforms have been strongly oriented towards the liberalisation and the flexibilisation of labour market increasingly considered as too rigid. These attempts tried to respond on the growing pressure due not only to the worsening of the economic situation during the early 1990s and the changing employment structure, but also in light of the Maastricht criteria for the entry in the European monetary union. In this context, the first very incisive labour market reform has been introduced with the so called Treu package (named after the Labour Minister Tiziano Treu) in 1997 (l. n. 196/1997). This reform aimed at increasing both the employment rate as well as the overall labour market flexibility through reforms at its „margins", i.e. through the introduction of atypical contracts, in particular temporary agency work. At the same time, further legislative measures (d. lgs. 469/1997) introduced both a stronger emphasis on and the devolution of active labour market policies and abolished also the public monopoly on the supply of unemployment services (in response to the decision of the European Court of Justice („Job Centre 2")). With this new legal framework the responsibilities in matters of active labour market policy have been transferred to lower levels, attributing to the Regions the legislative authority, whereas the management of Public Employment Services has been given in the hand of Provinces (next lower level in the Public Administration).[37] This reform has also been intended to change the role of the Public Employment Services (as reflected also by their changing denomination from „*Uffici di collocamento*" (Placement offices) to „*Centri per l'impiego*"

[36] Already in 1968, the ordinary short time work scheme (*cassa integrazione guadagni* (*CIG*)) introduced in 1947 and applicable for firms with more than 15 employees in the industrial, agricultural and construction sector, had been extended with the introduction of an extraordinary short time work scheme (*cassa integrazione guadagni straordinaria* (*CIGS*)). Additionally, in 1991, another special measure, the so called mobility benefit (*indennità di mobilità*), was introduced. It is paid to workers in status of collective dismissal (but always restricted to the above mentioned firms with more than 15 employees). This mobility benefit is more generous than the regular unemployment benefit and should been combined with services and training measure in order to facilitate the quick transition into a new job. However, the introduction of the mobility benefit signs a new approach, i.e. the protection of the worker outside the contract in contrast to the protection of the job itself (as it is the case fort he *CIG* and the *CIGS*).
Early exit possibilities have been created in 1981 with the statute law on early retirement (l.n. 155/1981).
In response to the last economic crisis, the legislator has foreseen that both the mobility and the short time work schemes can be applied also in exceptional way (*ammortizzatori sociali in deroga*) in order to close the gaps not covered by the strongly category based nature of the schemes.
This shows clearly how the Italian benefit system has always been strongly oriented towards protecting against unemployment (and hence towards in work protection) and how reforms of the benefit system tried to maintain this orientation by increasingly extending short time work and mobility schemes.

[37] This process of decentralisation has been supported and even extended with the Constitutional Reform in 2001.

(Centres for employment)) from the bureaucratic fulfillment of managing job placement lists to service centres providing a variety of services ranging from placement to training and counselling services.[38] The second main labour market reform was given with the Biagi Law in 2003 (named after labour lawyer Marco Biagi) (l. n. 30/2003 and d. lgs. n. 276/2003). This reform further deregulated the use of atypical work arrangements, such as part-time work and temporary agency work, and introduced new forms of atypical contracts such as project work, on call jobs and job sharing. With regard to the provision of private employment services the Biagi reform introduced the possibility for the merge of private employment service provision and temporary work placement in private agencies (the so called *Agenzie per il lavoro*). (Sacchi and Vesan 2011, Vesan 2012, Calza Bini and Lucciarini 2013).

However, the main impact of these reforms consisted in the flexibilisation of the labour market and the introduction of new forms of atypical work increasingly used and misused by employers to substitute the traditional employment contracts (Borzaga 2012). It is important to underline, that this strong flexibilisation of the labour market and the proliferation of atypical work arrangements has not been equally matched neither by the provision of social protection schemes for atypical workers nor by the investment in Public Employment Services which continue to be not very effective (and to have a bad reputation both among job seekers and employers) and which are often hardly integrated both with the local offices of the national social security institute (INPS) as well as with local welfare agencies (being, thus, far from a model of integrated service provision or one-stop shops). This situation is even more critical as Italy is still lacking at all a national social assistance or minimum income scheme.[39] Furthermore, the decentralisation process has led to different regional (and even provincial) approaches and to a highly fragmented system of active labour market policies which contributes to the general situation of high regional differences and disparities in the concrete welfare configurations. (Ambra et al 2013, Kazepov and Barberis 2013, Ascoli 2011, Ranci 2005).

[38] For the introduction of a better job matching and work inducing measures as well as the definition of criteria and requiremments for benefits receipt see l. n. 144/99 and Decreto legislativo 181/2000.

[39] Between 1999 and 2001 Italy had seen an experimentation of a proposal for a national minimum income scheme, the so called *reddito minimo di inserimento* (*RMI*), which had taken place in different municipalities. However, after the change of government in 2001 the proposal was dismissed by the centreright government and since then there has been no other attempt to introduce a national minimum income scheme, despite respective recommendations by the European Union. However, some Regions as well as Autonomous Provinces have introduced minimum income schemes on regional and provincial level. (Gambardella et al. 2013, Madama 2012).

In their analysis of Italian labour market reform attempts since the mid of the 1990s, Sacchi and Vesan (2011) distinguish three dimensions of change. The first one is the strategic dimension which relates to the main policy goals and to the policy instruments applied for their achievement. The second one, the distributive dimension refers to the levels of protection available for the different categories of workers, while the third one, the organisational dimension concerns the governance of labour market policies and the institutional solutions for their implementation on regional and provincial level. With regard to the strategic dimension, Sacchi and Vesan underline a gradual reorientation towards a more proactive design of labour market policies through a stronger emphasis on the conditionality of benefits, the confinement of early exit options, and, at least initially, a slight relocation of resources from passive to active measures. However, Sacchi and Vesan also underline the difficulties in the implementation of these general policy goals, first of all in relation to the stronger conditionality of benefits, as well as the strong discontinuities in the investment in active measures. Much stronger has been, on the contrary, the main policy goal of labour marker flexibilisation and its far more consequent implementation (and misuse) have led to a strong increase of atypical work arrangements even though their success in raising the overall employment level is highly debatable. (Sacchi and Vesan 2011).

With regard to the distributive level, Sacchi and Vesan point out that the overall architecture of the system of benefits has remained unchanged, although there had been some tendencies of convergence and harmonisation between special measures like the short time work schemes and the mobility benefits available only for certain categories of workers and the ordinary unemployment benefit. While the use of the special measures had been increasingly contained, the ordinary unemployment had been made more generous and its use has expanded over time, reducing this way at least to some extent the differences in the protection of categories of workers. However, with the strong increase of atypical contracts, the number of workers without any protection has grown substantially and broad segments of the Italian workforce continue to be without any protection in case of unemployment (Berton et al. 2009). Furthermore, as a response to the economic and employment crisis, since 2008 there has been again a stronger and even an exceptional use of the short time work schemes and the mobility benefit (Sacchi and Vesan 2011, Calza Bini and Lucciarini 2013).[40]

[40] In this context, the exceptional use of the benefit schemes has been combinded with a redefinition of conditionality criteria and a stronger emphasis on activation measures (see art. 19 Decreto Legge,

In relation to the organisational dimension, Sacchi and Vesan confirm the different approaches to active labour market policies on the regional level, which lead to difficult processes of governance and different institutional solutions for the provision of employment services on the provincial level. Furthermore they point out the lacking integration of Public Employment Services in the broader context of an integrated welfare system on the local level. Regarding the performance of Public Employment Services, Sacchi and Vesan underline the difficulties in the provision of individualised services, especially in the Southern regions, which are due to their inadequate infrastructure, the prevailing of obsolete and muddled bureaucratic practices and, not least, by the basic design of this services which refers to an ideal overall labour market situation which is often far away from real conditions (Sacchi and Vesan 2011).[41]

In a nutshell, it can be stated that Italian labour market policies are still characterised, first of all, by a strong dualism between insiders and outsiders with protected categories of „typical" workers on the one side and non protected and highly precarious „atypical" workers on the other one. The flexibilisation of the labour market during the last decades has been accompanied only by a weak investment in active labour market policies and marginal support services. Furthermore, regionally different approaches and regulative frameworks (against the background of the strong economic South-North divide of the country) have led to very different situations, and indeed different ALMP policy regimes, which can vary from Region to Region (and even form Province to Province).

It has been, thus, against this background of a deregulated labour market with a high share of atypical work arrangements without any access to unemployment protection and of weak active labour market policies, that Italy has been hit by the economic and financial crisis since 2008. The severe consequences of the crisis in terms of economic downturn and a high rise of the unemployment rate, especially among young people have additionally worsened the situation on the Italian labour market.[42] In this context, the last main labour market reform, the so called Fornero reform (named after the former Labour Minister) from 2012 (l. n. 92/2012), has pursued two main policy goals. On the one hand, the reform efforts are intended to confine the misuse of atypical contracts and to promote stable work arrangements. On the other hand, the reform tries to modify the unemployment benefits

testo coordinato 29.11.2008, n. 185, G.U. 28.01.2009 "Decreto anticrisi: misure per il sostegno a famiglie, lavoro, occupazione e impresa").

[41] For a critcial analysis of the performance of Public Employment Services in comparative perspective see Larsen and Vesan 2012.

[42] In 2013 the average youth unemployment rate (population aged < 25) in Italy was 40,0% (EUROSTAT)

system through the introduction of a new type of benefit, the so called *ASPI* (*assicurazione sociale per l'impiego*). This new benefit is intended to create an universal social security cushion for all the unemployed which should be connected with stronger activation measures.[43] In this sense, the new *ASPI* benefit should reduce the existing high number of different unemployment benefits by progressively substituting them. Despite these reform intentions it is highly questionable if the current budgetary restraints and the strong categorisation of the existing benefit system will allow the implementation of the *ASPI* as a real universal measure. However, its introduction can be interpreted as an important attempt and as a first step towards the simplification of the existing benefit system and a more equal treatment if workers (Cinelli 2013, Bozzao 2013, Giubboni 2013).

Anyway, despite these different reforms of the Italian labour market, it can still be stated that up to now they haven't found clear answers to central issues. These are, firstly, the strong category based design of unemployment benefits and, secondly, the lack of institutional coordination not only between labour market and social policies and services in the wider sense[44], but even between the administration of unemployment benefits and activation services delivery. The third unsolved issue is given with the scarse attention to the relationship between labour demand and supply and, hence, economic development policies and employment and social protection policies, while the fourth issue relates to the absence of any essential social assistance level or minimum income scheme as an eligible right on the national level. (Sacchi and Vesan 2011, Vesan 2012, Calza Bini and Lucciarini 2013).

In a comparative perspective, Italy can be, hence, considered as a latecomer in aligning its labour market and social policies towards the activation paradigm. Of course this is not only due to a delay in picking up new ideas about welfare state development, but it has also to do with Italy's welfare tradition and with its structural preconditions for the reorientation of its labour market and social policies. Italy on the one hand shared the difficulties of other continental countries in combining a more flexible labour market with supporting services and new social security provisions due to the continental tradition of strict job protection and generous insurance based unemployment benefits for typical workers. Furthermore Italy shows the main characteristics of the Mediterranean welfare

[43] In relation to the introduction of stronger activation measures see art 4, comma 40 et seqq. of l. n. 92/2012.

[44] Against this background of a lacking integration and coordination between employment services and local welfare agencies, it is very interesting what Lumino and Pirone highlight in relation to the orientation of social workers at the frontline of local welfare agencies. They show that at the local level it is, actually, often left to the discretion of social workers (and to their embracement of policy ideas) whether the receipt of local social assistance measures is maid conditional on active efforts for labour market integration or not. (Lumino and Pirone 2013).

model with its heavy rely on the familialistic production of welfare, poor social services, and the lack of a minimum income safety net. Against this background the increasing flexibilisation of the Italain labour market has strongly come along with new risks of social exclusion (Berton et al. 2009). In fact, in his proposal of different employment regimes in Europe, Capparucci (2009) assigns Italy to the so called flex-exclusive regime (together with Spain, Portugal and Greece) with a high degree of flexibilisation of the labour market mainly through the application of atypical work arrangements and high risks due to the difficult access to socially protected work contracts and the lack of supporting services.[45] Referring to the different activation regimes presented in chapter one Italy is best represented by the so called Fragmented Provision Regime (Serrano Pascual 2007) characterised by weak social protection policies, segmented safety nets and underdeveloped personalised services.

However, a general characterisation of Italy is difficult and leads inevitably to blurring generalisations. For a precise analysis it is rather conducive to look on the different worlds or "geographies of activation" (Ambra et al. 2013) that can be found underneath the national level. Ambra et al. (2013) analyse models of activation policies in four different Italian regions, pointing out that their variation is due to both different modes of governance as well as regionally different labour market situations (especially between the North and the South). The Lombardy region, for instance, is characterised by a clear orientation towards activation and towards the marketisation of employment services. The Lombardy region has, of course, the advantage to be a wealthy region, not only compared to other Italian regions, particularly of the South, but also on a European scale. Accordingly, the advantageous labour market situation offers better preconditions for the definition and implementation of activation policies as it is the case in other regions. Furthermore, the Lombardy is one of the Italian regions which has most profoundly changed its general welfare arrangement giving reason to the definition in literature of the so called "Lombardy welfare model" (Carabelli and Facchini 2011). This model is strongly inspired both by a liberist orientation towards marketisation and New Public Management approaches and by a consequent interpretation of the notion of subsidiarity, both vertically and horizontally. Vertical subsidiarity is however, interpreted in the light of a strong centralism on the regional level and less recognized towards sub-regional entities, such as Provinces or municipalities. What is given a strong emphasis, is horizontal subsidiarity, implying the notion that the public sector

[45] Capparucci (2009) distinguishes four different employment regimes in Europe. The first one, labelled as flex-inclusive, is represented by Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the UK, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, while the second one, labelled as flex-exclusive is represented by the Mediterranean countries. Germany, Austria and Finland form the third type, called standard-inclusive, while France and Belgium are associated to the fourth, the standard-exclusive regime.

should not provide services which citizens, families and private bodies (both non-for-profit and for-profit) can supply themselves. Accordingly, both the market and the private non-for-profit sector are strongly included in the welfare provision system making public provision considered almost as an interference (Bifulco 2011). With regard to labour market policies the Lombardy Region has seen the introduction of two main regional laws intended to implement the main provisions of the national reform boost outlined above. Accordingly, the first law (*legge regionale 1/1999*) has regulated the regional governing tasks (addressing, planning, coordination and evaluation) in matters of active labour market policies as well as the administrative decentralisation for their implementation, assigning to the Provinces the competences of planning and management of the public employment services (including matching and monitoring functions). The second law (*legge regionale 22/2006*) made, however, a step back to a stronger concentration of competences on the regional level on the one hand, but pushing, on the other one, towards a system of competitive provision of employment services by both private and public providers and leaving to the provinces the tasks of planning and implementing local policies. (Ambra et al. 2013). This push towards a stronger marketisation of employment services has been matched, on the side of the of the individual (as purchaser), by the introduction of a so called *dote* system (Sabatinelli and Villa 2011). The *dote* (literally: endowment) is a kind of voucher, an economic entitlement (defined, however, on a category related basis) that the person can spend in order to purchase different services. The extension to this system also to employment services has been intended on the one hand to foster the marketisation and competition in this field and to better connect training and labour market policies. On the other hand, relating to the individual persons, the *dote* should stimulate them to activate themselves maintaining at the same time their freedom of choice as consumers of services. In their conference paper, Sabatinelli and Villa provide an interesting analysis of this system and its implications pointing out, that both local authorities and accredited bodies are almost excluded from planning processes and mainly reduced to their role as service providers in a quasi-market environment. With regard to the individual persons, Sabatinelli and Villa point out, that the *dote* system "depicts a specific but coherent actualization of some of the paradoxical logics that the literature already attributed to the activation discourse. For instance, about the underestimation of social causes of unemployment, the way in which the individual is regarded as autonomous and responsible, the disappearance of the real conditions whereby this autonomy and responsibility can be exercised; the paradox to push towards autonomy, predefining every kind of step to get it and the form it has to assume (…) In this sense,

individualization is moved from the meaning of a paradigm that qualifies the relationship among *means, contents, processes and goals* to a mere level of *administrative, financial and relational strict* regulation. So that the system risks not to guarantee the appropriateness of the interventions to the person's need, settling down a paradoxical combination of individualization without personalization, loss of quality and continuity of services, increase of financial and organizational stress of bodies, strengthening of the centralizes and authoritarian power of the region. What is more, far from designing an inclusive system, the *Dote* excludes many citizens from provision, by addressing all existing resources on measures the entitlement to which is strictly defined on a category basis." (Sabatinelli and Villa 2011: 19f, italics in the original).

3.1.3. Public Employment Services in the city of Vienna

Vienna is not only the biggest city and capital of Austria, but at the same time it is one of the nine Austrain federal states (*Bundesländer*). The city and metropolitan era of Vienna is Austria's political, cultural and economic center. The economy in the metropolitan era of Vienna has experienced enormous changes over recent decades. Up to the late 1980s Vienna was mainly defined by its position close to the Iron Curtain and not at least due the Austrian Declaration of Neutrality, the city of Vienna was an important place for the international political meetings and for cautios contacts between the capitalist West and the communist East. Vienna's economy, however, was characterised by its strong focus on national markets and by a high share of public sector employment. Despite the decline of the manufacturing sector and retarded service sector growth, employment in Vienna was still growing up to the 1970s due to Austrakeynesian politics of deficit spending and expansion of public sector employment. Although first signs of crises of the post-war growth model began to arise already throughout the 1970s, major changes in the Austrian economy occured from the second half of the 1980s. The fall of the Iron Curtian as well as Austria's accession to the European Union forced the economy in the Viennese metropolitan era to abandon its national orientation and to integrate in an internationalising economy which resulted in a process of strong economic restructuring with the expansion of the private service sector, especially the retailing, banking and insurance business. (Schmee and Weigl 1999, Mayerhofer 2007).

These processes of economic restructuring dominated by the growth of the service sector and human-capital and software based economic activities had of course important consequences in the demand of workforce, and low-skilled workers had been increasingly faced with severe problems on the labour market. This is respected in the development of unemployment in Vienna since the late 1980s. While up to the second half of the 1980s unemployment in Vienna had been only slightly above and varied in parallel to the national average, since then there is a growing divergence betweeen the unemployment level in Vienna and in the rest of the country. Especially during periods of crisis unemployment in Vienna rises more significantly, with highest rates especially for low-qualified and migrant workers. (Atzmüller 2009b).

Recent figures show that this trend continues. Vienna's labour market is at the same time characterised by growing employment rates for high-skilled workers and growing unemployment rates for low-qualified workers. The current unemployment rate among people who have no qualification completed beyond compulsory school amounts to 29,4% accounting for more than half of the unemployed in Vienna (figures of December 2013). According to current economic forecasts employment in Vienna is set to continue to increase by 2016. The major part of this increase will, however, account for scientific professions in the area of science and technology as well as for qualified professions in the healthcare sector, while the labour market situation will become even more difficult for low-qualified workers. (WAFF 2014).

As it has already been pointed out, labour market policy in Austria falls under the responsibility of the Federal Ministry, today's Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (*Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz*). The Austrian Public Employment Service (*AMS*) implements the labour market policy of the Federal Government and has the overall aims to offer services both for job-seekers and enterprises and to generally promote the adaptability of the labour force. The *AMS* assumes its role as an service provision enterprise under public law in close cooperation with labour and employers' organisations offering advice, information, qualification opportunities and financial assistance as well as matching services to constantly connect job-seekers and job openings on the labour market. The organisational structure of the AMS in Vienna comprises the AMS federal state office for Vienna (*AMS Landesgeschäftsstelle Wien*), twelve local branch offices allocated over the Viennese territory and a specialised branch office for young job-seekers aged up to 21 years (*AMS Wien Jugendliche*).

Furthermore, in 1995 the city of Vienna founded a special local ALMP institution, the so called *WAFF* (*Wiener ArbeitnehmerInnen Förderungsfonds*) which is attached to the Vienna City Council's economic and finance department and works on specific challenges of the Viennese labour market in addition to the labour market policy decided by the Federal Government and in close cooperation with the AMS and the social partners. As Atzmüller (2009b) points out, the aim of the *WAFF* is to help people to stay in employment and to develop their potential through measures that go beyond the scope of services provided by the *AMS* focusing on high quality training strategies and on social integration and labour market policy programmes which do not focus only on quick labour market re-enty but are based „on the idea of helping people cope with personal and private problems as a precondition for successful reintegration into employment" (Atzmüller 2009: 606).

3.1.4. Public Employment Services in the city of Milan

Interestingly, despite the strong push towards marketisation of employment services in the Lombardy region, the Province of Milan choose the way of a general relaunch of its Public Employment Services. The Province of Milan set up special agencies for Training, Guidance and Work (the so called *AFOL – Agenzie per la formazione, l'orientamento e il lavoro*) which cover the whole metropolitan area of Milan. These *AFOL* agencies are special enterprises of the Provincial Authority with their own legal status and management autonomy. They have been founded with the idea of a general relaunch of public employment, orientation and trainings services and their better integration and institutional coordination.

In the city of Milan, services are provided by the *AFOL Milano* set up in 2007. *AFOL Milano* has been set up as an umbrella organisation which has incorporated different former separated services, such as the public employment service (*Centro per l'impiego*) and career guidance and vocational training centres. The general aim of the *AFOL* is to offer a spectrum of services to both citizens and employers intended to reduce and to prevent unemployment, to improve the quality of work, to invest in the development of human resources and to support economic development on the local and regional scale. In particular, the employment service (*Centro per l'impiego*) offers the traditional public employment services such the

management of job placement lists and a job database system, but also different support services to special target groups of job-seekers, pre-selection and matching services as well as an enterprise help desk and a job call centre. Moreover, *AFOL Milano* manages training services through its three vocational training centres (*Centri di formazione professionale*) while guidance services are offered by specialised career guidance services (*Polo Orientamento* and *Job Caffè*). These guidance services offer information spaces, where people can look up newspapers or surf the internet for job offers and access *AFOL*'s data bases and job-seeking software. Furthermore people can use computers and get advice in preparing their CVs and their presentation documents there. For more individual support and advice for job-seeking as well as for the discussion of individual professional or educational choices people can have also one-to-one interviews with professional advisers. These guidance services offer also services for special target groups, such as women who want to re-enter the labour market or migrant people, as well as school guidance projects and special guidance for high-school drop-outs. Another specialised service is the career guidance service tailored to the needs of jobless middle and high managers (*servizio alte professionalità*) which also tries to connect them with enterprises willing to hire in middle and high management positions. These guidance services take part in European projects and international networks such as the EURES network and the *Citè des Metiers Internationa*l Network (*Città dei Mestieri e delle Professioni*) and they also work on regional projects and funding. The above mentioned *dote* vouchers, for instance, can be used to get training services offered by the *AFOL*.

3.2. The research project

As Mason (2002) emphasises, thinking about developing, designing and undertaking a research project in the social sciences obviously involves finding a focus and knowing from which perspectives and assumptions, in general on social reality and in particular on the topic of the research, to start from. Identifying a general area of interest or an overall topic is very often straightforward as the interest of the researcher has often developed over time or might be even experienced as "given" due to former studies, professional or other experiences in the social world. However, finding and constructing one's own focus and standpoint around an intellectual puzzle that involves ontological assumptions and epistemological positions, and deducing from there adequate methodological considerations

is much more of a challenge, especially for an abecedarian and beginner in research, like a PhD student.

3.2.1. Research aims and questions

This research project is based on the central assumption that what activation eventually means is last, but not least, shaped by frontline practice in activation services. In this sense, it has been pointed out throughout the theoretical chapters, how the current debate and research literature takes increasingly into account the operational side of activation policies and acknowledges also that frontline practice matters in relation to what activation eventually means for unemployed people. However, research inspired by policy implementation approaches often frames the issue of frontline practice merely as an implementation and organisational issue focusing on the notion of discretion (and its control) in relation to the implementation (or distortion) of formal policy goals. In contrast, or better, additionally, it has been pointed out how critical approaches inspired by Foucauldian thinking on governmentality, look on frontline practice as governing people through the conduct of conduct (Foucault 2000: 341), i.e. the tricky combinations of external constraints and subtle strategies of subjectification for self-government. These perspectives have been additionally complemented with an approach of interpretive policy analysis which is inspired by the hermeneutic tradition and highlights the importance of situated agency in policy analysis and focuses on local practices and meaning making capacities of policy actors as situated agents.

Against this background the overall aim of the research project is to explore and to better understand how frontline workers in activation services as situated agents and thus, as crucial actors within the policy making chain, interpret their role and how they represent the ways they act and move in practice by making use of their discretional spaces and against the background of their practical judgements.

This overall aim of the research project to focus on frontline practitioners in activation services is inspired by the idea that exploring the practice of activation on the frontline of services makes an important contribution to better tell the full activation story. Brodkin and Marson (2013) point out the discontinuities which often exist between examining workfare and activation strategies on the ground and research conducted on more abstract levels. There is, hence, a growing interest in opening the street-level practice of activation and to put it on the forefront of analysis in order to understand how activation after all works on the

ground. This is particularly important in relation to the question which implications activation strategies have on social citizenship, not only formally, but in concrete, when rights and duties are calibrated and embodied by contractual agreements and individual activation plans stipulated between frontline practitioners and the unemployed (especially if they are beneficiaries of public benefits).

Obviously, opening up street-level practice for further explorations and investigations can involve different entry points and research strategies. So why interview frontline practitioners? It could be argued that there might be important differences and discrepancies between what frontline practitioners tell and what they are ultimately doing in practice. Or it could be asked why not interviewing service users as policy takers who eventually experience and have to handle the consequences of activation policies on and in their lives. Of course, there are different important perspectives appropriate to provide different findings and to add different pieces to the mosaic of activation in practice. Focusing on frontline practitioners and asking them directly about their daily street-level practice can provide insights in how they themselves represent their interpretations of frontline activation work and how they depict their sense-making and their use of discretion in practice. In this sense, this perspective might allow to grasp challenges which are not apparent in or hidden behind formal policy goals and to understand how they are experienced by frontline practitioners themselves. Accordingly, it can provide deeper insights in dilemmas of activation work and in reactions of frontline workers based on their own understandings and as their meanings in action. Wagenaar (2011) points out, that interpretive policy approaches rely on the assumption that the experiences of policy actors provide a convenient entry point for discovering meaning in society and for discovering how meaning is important for mastering everyday life with its factual, affective and moral ambiguities. This perspective might, thus, help to understand how meanings and sense-making processes of practitioners influence their practical judgements and their decisions in the inevitable tension between legal and bureaucratic requirements on the one hand and the particulars of concrete people's needs and human encounters at the frontline of public employment services on the other, or as Maynard-Moody and Musheno make the point, "in a world where identity and moral judgements are bound up with the quotidian work of the state" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 8).

This perspective is particularly important for the upcoming debate on the possibilities and constraints for the professionalisation of frontline work in activation services. At is has been pointed out, activation work is often framed more as an administrative than as a

professional activity and also policy implementation inspired research often conceives street-level practice mainly as an issue of discretion management without taking account of the political, normative and ethical implications of frontline work in activation services. Also among the contributions which urge for the professionalisation of activation work the notion of professionalism is not always challenged and the debate on constraints and possibilities for a process of professionalisation in this ambiguous field is sometimes lacking the constant reconnection to the ambiguity of the notion of activation itself and to its interpretations in policy design and implementation with its implications for frontline practice. The research project is, thus, intended to contribute to this debate by providing findings on how frontline practitioners represent and frame the challenges of their frontline activity and how they try to react to and to cope with them.

The decision to undertake the research with frontline workers in the public employment services of two different realities has been inspired by the attempt to apply a comparative perspective and to analyse how the challenges of frontline activation work are represented by practitioners in two different national realities with different policy frameworks and governance structures and, thus, also in two very different organisational and practice contexts. These different active labour market policy and practice frameworks have to be seen also against the background of very different economic and political situations, where challenges differ both quantitatively and qualitatively and where labour market and public employment service reform attempts are characterised by different priorities and path-dependent trajectories. As has been pointed out, Austria is a continental country which implemented the shift towards activation in a stringent way maintaining a strong role of the national level and investing strongly in the reform of Public Employment Services. This has of course also to be seen against the favourable economic conditions and the low unemployment rate in the Austrian context. By contrast, Italy is rather a latecomer in the implementation of active labour market policies which are defined not by national policy but by the Regions while the provision of Public Employment Services has been decentralised to the Provincial level (the next lower level in Public Administration). This governance structure has led to a very fragmented system which varies strongly from Region to Region and which is even aggravated by the huge differences in the economic and employment situation within the national context, especially between the North and the South of the country. However, both the metropolitan areas of Vienna and Milan can be seen as the economic centre of the respective country and in both realities there have been notable efforts for the relaunch of Public Employment Services and for the investment in activation

strategies. Nevertheless, although general policy intentions as well as the official organizational logics of the public employment services in the two cities show a lot of similarities, different benefits regimes and, thus, different entitlements and procedures as well as services create quite different practice contexts which involve also differences in where activation work is done and what it means in practice. It can be, anyway, assumed that in spite of different policy and practice (as well as general labour market) contexts, people who are unemployed or in search for employment and therefore draw upon public employment services have at least similar needs and problems which are encountered by frontline practitioners notwithstanding whatsoever details in policy provision and service organisation.

Accordingly, the research project is not intended to offer a systematic comparative case study of the activation policy and practice context in Vienna and Milan, but it concentrates on giving voice to frontline practitioners as policy actors, on exploring their interpretations of activation and their role in this context, the challenges they experience in practice, and on understanding how they cope with them in the direct interaction with their clients. Of course, similarities and differences which emerge from the representations of frontline activation workers in the two different policy and practice contexts reflect different modes of governance, organisational solutions and management practices which are part of the operational side of policy and determine the practice framework and, thus, the concrete conditions for frontline practice. However, as the research project aims to deepen insights in frontline practice and, thus, applies a delimited qualitative approach, it cannot be than explorative in this respect and must be extremely cautious in (not) making causal links between the external framework and the findings from the interviews with frontline practitioners. Anyway, the interpretations and the sense-making of frontline practitioners which emerge from their narrative accounts of what is going on in practice has to do with the ways the notion of activation has been taken up and interpreted along the policy making chain. This research project, however, concentrates on the last link of this chain where the policy is brought to the people and where frontline practitioners have to mediate between policy goals and people's needs and, indeed, to connect private troubles and public issues in an accountable way.

Based on this perspective the general aims of the research project were broken down into a set of concrete research question which provided, then, the basic grid for the construction of a more detailed interview guideline (see in the appendix). The main research questions of the research project are:

How do frontline practitioners in public employment services interpret and represent the practice of activation?

How do they contextualise what they are doing on the street-level in a wider social policy context and how do they, in particular, interpret the notion of activation?

Where do frontline practitioners see their discretional spaces and how do they make use of them?

How do frontline practitioners see (and construct) the users of public employment services?

3.2.2. The overall research design and the method of qualitative interviewing

Even though the encounters and debates between different research traditions and paradigms (or better between their well established representatives) do not always reflect it, decisions related to the design of a research project and the respective methodological choices are not, or at least not in the first instance, a matter of mere preference or convictions. They rather derive from the basic epistemological perspective and intent and have to fit with the aims of a research project and to provide relevant information for what the research is expected to find out. Accordingly, it is clear that this research project requires a qualitative, understanding approach. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) point out, "(q)ualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. (...) (Q)ualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 3). As pointed out, in the context of this research project it is of crucial importance to understand which meanings frontline practitioners bring to what they are doing and to explore how these meanings influence the frontline practice of activation. In this sense, what practitioners eventually do has to be conceived as their „meaning in action" (Wagenaar 2011) and exploring their meanings serves as the critcal entry point to understand what Weber calls the qualitative aspect of phenomena (*„die qualitative Färbung der Vorgänge"* (Weber 1994: 173)). It is, hence assumed that exploring the sense-making, the interpretations, and orientation patterns of frontline practitioners is important to grasp the qualitative aspects of how activation policies are eventually transformed into practices at the frontline of activation services and to understand the (maybe different) ways frontline practitioners deal with dilemmas and challenges, make use of discretional spaces and, after all, treat people in the moment they encounter them as service users, as benefit recipients, as „the unemployed".

Accordingly, this perspective and research intent requires to go in depth, to expand into what practitioners think and into how they make sense of their job and, thus, to go and ask them directly, to interview them on this issues. But how to do these interviews? Interviewing as a research method is more than just going out there and ask questions to people. At the same time it is still going out there and ask questions to people, getting information from "living sources", i.e. through conversation (and, hence, social interaction)

with people who might be experts, who of course have been informed and have given their consent for the interview, but who are also "strangers" (Weiss 1994) asked questions in an artificial setting. Thus, the art and method of qualitative interviewing and, eventually, also the quality of data depend on how this process and indeed interaction occurs and succeeds. This means that there is no single approach or a fix set of simple guidelines on how to do qualitative interviews and interviewing is by its nature relational, dynamic, creative and flexible. However, this is not an excuse for an "anything-goes" approach or for doing whatever the researcher wants do to. On the contrary, qualitative interviewing involves careful preparation and planning as well as the reflexive management and control of the interviewing process.[46] This is often underestimated and there are frequent misconceptions about qualitative interviewing as just asking questions to someone, as something simple and self-evident, as something everyone knows how to do it. But as Oakley makes the point, "(i)nterviewing is rather like a marriage: Everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets." (Oakley 1981: 41)

Despite, or better, due to this complexity of qualitative interviewing the respective methodological debate has developed a broad body of knowledge and an overwhelming literature concerning different approaches on, different models and formats of, as well as different techniques for qualitative interviewing (Kuhn 1962, Fontana and Frey 1994, Froschauer and Lueger 2003, Legard et al. 2003, Bogner et al. 2005, Helfferich 2005, Gläser and Laudel 2010, Rubin and Rubin 2012). Very generally, it can be stated that qualitative interviewing as a research method in the social sciences is always characterized by the specific epistemological purpose to gain qualitative data, which means to grasp the perceptual schemes of interviewees or/and to generate information on their views, attitudes, experiences, and opinions concerning the subject matter. Depending on its purposes in a specific research design the interview can vary in relation to its setting and structure. Defining the setting and the structure of the interview has to take carefully into account a few basic questions relating to who the interviewees are and to the ways they are most likely to provide relevant information or, in other words, to what extent and how knowledge 'out there' can be captured and/or constructed in the interview situation (Legard et al. 2003).

[46] As Sandelowski and Barroso state, "(r)eflexivity is a hallmark of excellent qualitative research and it entails the ability and willingness of researchers to acknowledge and take account of the many ways they themselves influence research findings and thus what comes to be accepted as knowledge. Reflexivity implies the ability to reflect inward toward oneself as an inquirer; outward to the cultural, historical, linguistic, political, and other forces that shape everything about inquiry; and, in between researcher and participant to the social interaction they share." (Sandelowski and Barroso 2002: 22)

Accordingly, in literature there have been developed and distinguished different models and types of qualitative interviews varying in relation to their setting (e.g. one-to-one vs. group interviews, face-to-face vs. mediated) and structure (open vs. (semi-)structured, in-depht vs. „surface“) but also in relation to the involvement of and the intercation with the interviewer, and last, but not least, the association with previous knowledge and theoretical assumptions (“tabula rasa” vs. theoretically guided asking). Different models of interviews are also distinguished in relation to specific reserach purposes (e.g. biographical interviews) or in relation to the application of certain techniques (e.g. guided interviews, dilemma interviews, critical incident interviews). It is neither possible nor needed in this context to give a detailled overview on these different types of qualititive interviewing. However, before describing in detail the steps of the reserach process, the following paragraphs briefly describe the interview types which have been taken into account as reference models in the context of this reserach project and the vignette technique which has been used in the interviews.

A first interview type reffered to in the context of this research project is the so called expert interview (Meuser and Nagel 2005, 2009, Bogner and Menz 2005, Bogner et al. 2005, Littig 2009, Gläser and Laudel 2010). The expert interview is applied in qualitative research projects concerning special experiences and knowledge as a result from responsibilities and actions given by a specific functional status within an institutional and organisational context. In this sense, the expert interview is intended to get information from expert knowledge as exclusive and non-public knowledge in relation to the subject matter under consideration. This knowledge can relate to the specific organisational and professional tasks of experts but also to their more implicit (or tacit) knowledge about routines, informal rules of decision-making, and orientation and interpretation patterns in practice. It this sense, expert knowlegde can be technical knowledge about administrative and professional competences and procedures, process-related knowledge about routines, interactions and ways of „getting jobs done“ in practice and last, but not least, interpretative knowledge about orientation and sense-making patterns of experts. (Bogner and Menz 2005).

In qualitative research methodology the expert interview has traditionally been associated to explorative objectives of quickly getting information by expert key informants (such as professionals or other decision-makers in administrative and political processes) without a deeper methodological reflection both on the notion of expert and the nature of expert knowledge. As Meuser and Nagel (2009) point out, it has been only from the 1990 that a better theoretical underpinning of the expert interview has been developed and that

specific methodological approaches on interviewing experts are discussed in the literature (Meuser and Nagel 2005, 2009, Bogner and Menz 2005, Bogner et al. 2005, Littig 2009, Gläser and Laudel 2010). First of all, the expert interview requires a definition of expert that goes beyond the general idea that everyone can be considered an expert for his or her general life situation. Anyway, in the respective literature there are two different perspectives in relation to the notion of expert. One is inspired by a more contructivist approach which points out that experts are defined from the outside and that the expert role is ascribed in relation to the subject matter by the reseracher. The other perspective is informed by the sociology of knowledge and defines the status of expert as resulting from the inside, from the posession (ownership) of special knowledge due to specific professional tasks and roles. As Meuser and Nagel (2009) point out, the notion of expert has necessarily the dual meaning of both holding a certain institutional or professional position (and, thus, of disposing of expert knowledge) and of being considered as an expert in relation to a given reserach interest. Accordingly, Meuser and Nagel (2009) define an expert as a person who is responsible for the development, implementation and control of problem solving strategies or policies and who has privileged access to information about groups of persons or decision processes. Also Littig (2009) points out that an expert is a person disposing decision-making power and special knowledge which significantly influences the freedom of others to act. In this sense, an expert can be considered as a person disposing the institutional authority to construct reality without being necesserily being part of a societal elite in the stricter sense of having superior social, intellectual or economic status and power. At the same time, however, expert knowledge can never be considered as neutral or as being exempt from power issues as experts always play a vital role in the definition of both problems and solutions (even in the mundane sphere of bureaucracy and of practical „real world“ solutions in everyday life). In fact, in the context of interpretative policy analysis the expert interview is gaining in importance, also in comparative approaches (see e.g. Pickel and Pickel 2009). It is, however, important to reflect on the disposability of knowledge and to not taken for too granted that expert knowledge is always already there as manifest and conscious, even more if the interview is intended to focus also on implicit process knowledge and on more latent interpretation patterns. These considerations are of crucial importance in relation to the framing of questions, the structure of the interview and last, but not least also to the interaction during the interview process. This is even more important as experts are often used (and trained) to speak and to inform about what hey are doing and to account for it in an official and public way. However, the more the dimensions of tacit knowledge on

informal strategies and of orientation and sense-making patterns shall be considered, the more it is importanat to go beneath the surface of official narratives and to get in depth by giving space to wider narrative accounts and deeper considerations.

In the context of this reserach project it has been important to consider and to acknowledge frontline practitioners as experts who are dispsoing important insights both into specific adminstrative regulations and procedures as well as in practice routines and decision making processes on the street-level and who are also in powerful positions of transforming policies into practices and of reacting to dilemmas and taking account (or not) of individual circumstances. In order to understand how frontline practitioners experience and interprete their job and how they make sense of what they are doing, it has been, however, also important to go in depth and to give them the space to tell their stories and to express their ways of dealing and coping with the challenges and difficulties of their job. As it has turned out throughout the interviews, frontline practitioners are used to constantly inform what their job is and to account for what they are doing. But they seem to have rare opportunities to speak about what is (really) going on at the services' frontline and to tell their stories of dilemmas, reactions and meanings.

These considerations bring closer to the questions on how actually doing the interview, how to structure it and how ask questions. In this context, it is important to address also the questions of how to deal with the background of the researcher and with previously acquired knowledge and made assumptions. On the on hand, interviewing frontline practitioners as experts and in relation to what extent and how frontline work matters to shape activation on the ground, requires a sound knowledge about the debate on the implementation of activation policies and a clear and theretically guided concept about what to ask frontline practitioners. On the other hand, it is clear that the interviews need also a certain degree of openness in order to allow practitioners to come up with their stories and their narrative accounts for the empirically grounded capture of interpretative patterns and the generation of new concepts. In this context, the problem-centred interview defined by Witzel (1982, 2000) provides a very useful interview model which neutralises „the alleged contradition between being directed by theory or being open-minded" (Witzel 2000: no page) and allows for a combination of deductive and inductive thinking. The problem-centred interview uses theoretical knowledge as elastic concepts and tries to further develop them by the inductive analysis of the obtained data. Witzel defines the model of the problem-centred interview by three basic principles. The first principle is the problem-centered orientation towards a previously defined and socially relevant problem. As Witzel states,

"(t)he interviewer makes use of the formerly noted objective conditions of the observed orientations and actions in order to understand the interviewees' explanations and continue the problem-centered questioning and re-questioning. (…) Parallel to the production of broad and differentiated data material, the interviewer is already working on understanding the subjective view of the respondent while gradually making communication more precisely address the research problem." (Witzel 2000: no page). The second basic principle, called object orientation, underlines the orientation towards the research matter and argues for methodical flexibility. In this sense, the interview must not follow a strictly pre-structured format but its concrete adaption must be appropriate to the given object of the reserach. In this sense, Witzel underlines that "conversation techniques are applied flexibly: according to the requirements of developing a communication situation focused on the individual respondent, the interviewer can more frequently use, depending on the varying degree of the respondent's reflection and eloquence, narration or recurrent questioning in dialogue procedures" (Witzel 2000: no page). With the principle of process-orientation, Witzel finally emphasises the need for a flexible combination of gathering and interpreting data throughout the research process which might lead to new aspects and problems which require additional information for understanding and interpretation. This way the problem-centred interview allows also to break down the artificialness of the research situation and interviewees are involved into a smoother conversation rather than feeling forced to just answer to isolated questions. In this sense, a flexible interview guideline is a crucial element of the problem centred interview. As Witzel points out, the guideline serves as "a supportive device to reinforce the interviewer's memory on the topics of research and provide a framework of orientation to ensure comparability of interviews. In addition, some ideas for lead questions into individual topics and preformulated questions to start the discussion are included. Ideally, they accompany the communication process as a sort of transparency of the background, serving to supervise how individual elements in the course of the discussion are worked through." (Witzel 2000: no page).

Finally, the considerations concerning the interview have to face also the questions on how to start the interview and, moreover, how to deal with the fact that the interviews are made in two different policy and practice context. For both these issues it seemed appropriate to use an initial stimulus which could be held constant in different situations. An interesting technique in this respect is the use of a prepared hypothetical example or a so called "vignette". Although describing the use of the vignette in a quantitative paradigm, Finch defines a vignettes as "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified

circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond" (Finch 1987: 105).[47] Vignettes are used also within the qualitative paradigm in order to „elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations" (Barter and Renold 1999: no page). As Barter and Renold point out, within the qualitative paradigm vignettes are often used as ice-breakers in order to facilitate the discussion at the beginning of the interview, as technique to tap general attitudes and beliefs or to explore sensitive topics. They can also be useful for examing different interpretations and perceptions of a given situation and in this sense, „they introduce an element of consistency which can be useful, allowing comparison between the reactions of different participants to the same hypothetical example" (Arthur and Nazroo 2003: 129). Vignettes are often used in reserach with professionals and in order to explore professional values and judgements (for the use of vignettes in qualitative research into social work values see, for instance, Wilks 2004). There are, however, some methodological challenges in the use of vignettes which derive mainly from the indeterminate relationships between beliefs and actions and researchers should, thus, be cautios in using the vignette technique in isolation (Finch 1978). Barter and Renold summarise some basic principles to guide the design of vignettes pointing out that vignettes must appear plausible and real to respondents. Accordingly, the design of vignette should avoid depicting eccentric characters or extreme events but at the same time it should incorporate elements able to stimulate a discussion. Furthermore, vignettes „need to contain sufficient context for respondents to have an understanding about the situation being depicted, but be vague enough to 'force' participants to provide additional factors which influence their decisions" (Barter and Renold 1999: no page), they should lead to the importnat issues without foreclosing possible areas of interests by chanelling respondents to much and they should be presented in an appropriate format taking carfully account of who the respondents are.

For the purposes of this reserach project the constructed vignette depictes the situation of a young person addressed to the public employment service (see appendix). The interviews were started by presenting the vignette and by asking some questions on what the Public Employment Service could offer in this situation, on how the practitioners would

[47] Similar definitions are given within the qualitative paradigm. Hill defines them as „short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios (Hill 1997: 177), Hazel (1995) speaks of „concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion (Hazel 1995: no page) and Hughes (1998) speaks of „stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes" (Hughes 1998: 381).

made a first assessment and on what would be the relevant elements to know for starting an individualised activation project. The use of the vignette has been indeed helpful as an ice-breaker to start the conversation and also as a tool of systematically asking at the beginning of the interview how practitioners start approaching a situation, what are the possible intake procedures and what could be possible service offers in the given situation. It turned out, however, that the importnat aspect was to provide a stimulus for practitioners to come up with their own examples and with their own stories and to go in depth by taking up their points, flexibly reacting to their arguments and reconnecting them to the reserach questions. In two cases, however, the vignette has not even been used because the interviewees started providing interesting insights already from the very first moment of informal contact making so that stopping them for the „official" start of the interview with the application of the vignette would have been a distracting interruption.

It can, thus, be summarised that the methodological choices for planning and realising the interviews for this research project have been oriented by both the model of the expert interview and the model of the problem-centred interview, and that the interview involved the application of the vignette technique.

However, interviewing is more than just choosing a certain format or applying a certain technique instead of another one. In fact, Fontanta and Frey underline that many scholars are realizing "that to pit one type of interviewing against another is a futile effort" (Fontana and Frey 1994: 373) and that good interviewing is not only about following a certain model or applying certain techniques. Of course, different types of interviews are suited to different situations and depending on the research intent and the interview situation the researcher has to study different models and types of interviewing and to decide which format and tools fit best to what he is going to ask to whom for which purposes. However, as Kuhn (1962) reminds, interviewing has to be seen also as a performance which must avoid both the risks of mystification on the one hand and of loss of sincerity by attempting to overmanage the interview situation on the other one. In this sense, interviewing needs always also a certain degree of flexibility and also a pinch of methodological pragmatism in order to adapt to the interview situation and to the world of the individuals who are being interviewed.

What is, anyway, of crucial importance is to constantly bear in mind that interviewing always implies a deeper dimension related to the self and the other (Fine 1994) and that the other is not a distant and faceless respondent but a living human being who agreed to participate in the "inter-view" in its sense of interchanging views on issues of mutual

interest. This requires openness and the willingness to disclosure and deserves, thus, attentiveness and respect. This is important not only in relation to interviewees who are associated to groups defined as oppressed, vulnerable and forgotten but in each interview situation, even if the interviewees are persons in powerful positions with a high degree of responsibility and privileged access to information about decision processes. It can never been taken for granted that people provide information going beneath the surface and telling their stories in depth. This is very important also in the context of this research project. Frontline practitioners are used to give clear information about what their job is and to account for what they are doing in practice. But exploring what their job means to them and how they deal with challenges and dilemmas (maybe also in more hidden ways) cannot be taken as a matter of course but needs an interview setting and an interview interaction based on openness and on mutual trust.

In this sense, it gets quite clear that ethical considerations in qualitative interviewing have to go beyond the mere fulfillment of standard criteria and to take into account the finer dimensions of attitudes and stances and, indeed, tuning between people who are having a conversation with a specific purpose. Obviously, traditional ethical concerns such as the informed consent, the guarantee of absolute anonymity and the protection from harm have to be taken seriously as *sine qua non*. But the interviewer in qualitative social research has to critically reflect on the fact that his or her ethical concerns and attitudes are intrinsically tied to the questions on how to do the interview and, eventually, also to the quality of gained data. This means to take seriously the political and ethical nature of qualitative interviewing throughout the whole research process assuring this way also the quality of the latter. In this sense, it is important to remind that "sound ethics and sound methodology go hand in hand" (Sieber 1992: 4) or as already Blumer made the point with his simple injunction, to "(r)espect the nature of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect" (Blumer 1986: 60). The methodology of qualitative interviewing must, thus, first and foremost reflect the openness and the willingness to learn from the "other" and assure the conditions for respondents as human beings to uncover their lives in relation to the research questions (and to respect if they don't do it). Recognising respondents as human beings of course involves also the researcher as a human being. "(A)s we treat the other as a human being, we can no longer remain objective, faceless interviewers, but become human beings and must disclose ourselves as we try to learn about the other." (Fontana and Frey 1994: 373f).

3.2.3. The reserach process from design to data analysis

While general considerations in relation to the reserach design and to the method of qualitative interviewing have already been discussed in the previous subchapter, the following paragraphs give a structured overview on the whole reserach process providing further steps and considerations in relation to data generation, management and analysis.

3.2.3.1. Data generation

The first step for data generation is a careful research design. As it has been already pointed out, the reserch design has to fit with the reserach aims and must be appropriate to the intellectual puzzle that involves theoretical perspectives and epistemological positions and serves as starting point for further methodological considerations and for the stepwise refinement of the reserach design.

This reserach project required a qualitative reserach design able to grasp the meanings frontline practitioners in public empoyment service bring to their job and to understand how they represent and cope with the respective challenges in order to better explore their crucial role as policy actors on the ground. These overall aims of the research project were then broken down by the definition of a set of more specific research questions which provided, in a later stage, already the basic grid for the interview guideline. Before elaborating the interview guidline it had been important to better study the method of qualitative interviewing and to decide which approach and models to follow in the planning and the conduct of the interviews. As has been pointed out, the models serving as main references have been identified in the model of the expert interview and the model of the problem centred interview. Furthermore, there have been good arguments for applying the vignette technique in the interviews. On the one hand the vignette seemed a valid instrument for eliciting pratitioners perceptions and beliefs, on the other hand it provided a stimulus which could be held constant and, thus, an element of consistency useful for comparisons not only between the interviewed practitioners but also between the different practice contexts in Vienna and Milan. Based on these considerations and methodological decisions, the next steps of the research design consisted in the concrete design of the vignette and in the construction of the interview guideline for the one-to-one interviews with frontline practitioners (see appendix). The interview intruments were then tested in pretest interviews with four practitioners of Public Employment Services (in two employment services in the

Provinces of Bolzano/Bozen and Trento in Italy).

The next important stages concerened access and sampling. The first step in this regard consisted in getting access to the public employment services in the city of Vienna and Milan.

Getting access to the AMS in Vienna was possible by contacting a person come previously across at a conference. This person made the contact with one department head of the AMS federal state office for Vienna who agreed to an appoinment in order to speak about the research intent. The research project was then presented to this key person who was very helpful from the first moment and subsequently provided the contacts to twelve frontline practitioners in different local branch offices (four in the AMS for young people and eight in other local branch offices) who had already agreed to participate in the interview.

Also the access to the AFOL in Milan could be got in a very similar way. Through a social worker from Milan it had been possible to get some contacts within the AFOL context and again through the help of these contacts it was possible, in the end, to communicate directly with the two directors of the employment service and the career guidance services of AFOL Milano who also agreed to an appointment. During this appoinment the two directors better explained the structure and the services of AFOL Milano and after the presentation of the research project they already started to think of frontline practitioners to contact for an interview. Also in this case both the directors had been very helpful and one of them subsequently provided the contacts to 13 frontline practitioners both in the employment service and the career guidance services who had already been asked to participate in the interview.

Of course this sampling strategy shows both the strength and weaknesses of a convenience sampling and it could be argued that it had been additionally biased by the fact that the interviewees were not chosen directly by the researcher but by the contact persons and from a higher hierarchical level of the service organisation. As the small scale and qualitative nature of the research project does in any case not allow for any claims of representativeness, this sampling strategy could be accepted, especially due to the fact, that otherwise it would have been very difficult or even impossible to get directly in contact with frontline practitioners and to interview them.

The next stage concerned the real generation of data through the interview process. The first steps in this regard consisted in directly contacting the interview partners via e-mail giving them already a description of the research intent and explaining why their point of

view was important for the research project. They were asked their consent to participate and an appointment for the interview was established.

The interviews in the AMS offices in Vienna were then conducted from the end of November 2011 until end of January 2012. The duration of the interviews varied between approximately an hour and an hour and a half (shortest recording 54':13'', longest recording 95':49''). All the interview partners in Vienna had reserved enough time for the interview in their schedules and the interviews could be conducted with ease and in a closed and private setting. In two cases the interview partners involved also a colleague so that two of the twelve interviews involved to interviewees (in one of them not from the beginning, but only in a second moment when the colleague had finished her work in the adjoining room and was invited to join the conversation which had developed in a very interesting way). This way a total of 14 practitioners could be interviewed in the AMS offices in Vienna.

The interviews in Milan were conducted between early Februaray and mid of March 2012. In the AFOL context in Milan the conducting of the interviews was a bit more complicated. Not all the practitioners could participate in a one-to-one interview due to time reasons. Eventually, only three interviews could be conducted in one-to-one way, in one case the interview was a comibination of a first part of group interview with 3 interviewees and three short individual conversations with the three respondents afterwards. In another case the whole interview was conducted as a group interview with three interviewees. One the one hand, this fact, has of course introduced some biases, although the interview could go in depth anyway and the interviewed practitioners spoke nonetheless quite openly about challenges, difficulties and personal stances. On the other hand, the group interviews developed a different dynamic and the fact that the interviewees reacted to each other facilitated the debate and enhanced the reflexive content of the conversation. The interviews had a duration of about an hour for the individual intervies (shortest recording 54':50', longest recording 64':40'') and between two hours and two hours and twenty minutes (shortest recording 121':28'', longest recording 143':33''). From the 13 persons whose contact had been provided some had been transferred to other services or projects within the AFOL context, had quit the job or did never anser to the interview request, so that after all only nine frontline practitioners could be interviewed for the AFOL context in Milan.

All the interviews were taped, with the eccpetion of one interview where the practitioner refused to be taped. In this case, detailed notes were taken during the interviews and soon after the interview an additional written summary of the conversation was made.

3.2.3.2. Data management

The recordings of the interviews were fully transcribed taking into account only the spoken content disregarding pauses (with the exception of extended pauses for reflection which were only remarked without indicating their duration), fillers and crutch words without textual relevance and comments which the interviewer made only to signal that he was listening. The translation from talk to text tried to be as true to the conversation as possible giving higher priority to the proximity of the spoken word than to the form and sentence structure of the written text and maintaining also dialectal terms and phrases as well as contractions as spoken in the interview.

The transcripts were then imported into NVivo 9, the software used for the further data management and analysis.

3.2.3.3. Data analysis

The analysis of the obtained data was carried out applying the method of qualitative content analysis as it has been defined by Mayring (2000, 2010). The method of qualitative content analysis is used to systematically extract evidence about the content of qualitative data material and to interpret meaning from the identified content. Qualitative content analysis is applied if the data obtained in qualitative interviews can be taken as evidence for what interviewees usually, ordinarily, generally believe and for their general understandings of themes (Gomm 2008[48], Gläser and Laudel 2010) In this sense, content analyis can also be defined as „the use of replicable and valid method for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of its source" (Krippendorf 1969, p.103). Even though content analysis originally derives from a quantitative approach in the communication sciences (see e.g. Berelson 1952), Mayring emphasises that the method of content analysis can also be applied in a qualitative framework, „as an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models“ (Mayring 2000: no page). One of the distinctive elements of qualitative content analysis in comparison to other methods of analysis in the qualitative paradigm is that text interpretation is following the research questions which provide a first framework of themes and that the analysis can combine deductive category application with inductive category development from the data. In qualitative content analysis first themes or rough categories can be carefully founded on the basis of the reserach questions and these categories are then progressively revised and refined within the process of data analysis and

[48] Gomm (2008) prefers the term of “thematic analysis” as a qualitative version of content analysis.

by constant feedback loops. According to Mayring the main idea of the procedure of analysis in qualitative content analysis is „to formulate a criterion of definition, derived from theoretical background and research question, which determines the aspects of the textual material taken into account. Following this criterion the material is worked through and categories are tentative and step by step deduced. Within a feedback loop those categories are revised, eventually reduced to main categories and checked in respect to their reliability.“ (Mayring 2000: no page).

Accordingly the analysis of the obtained material started from the background of a rough sketch of themes and the coding of the material as the marking of text passages already occured within a general heuristic framwork and as a cyclical act of checking and further refining the system of themes, concepts and emerging categories by grasping the meaning brought to them by the different interviewees. Thus, the codes served indeed as the meaning capturing elements in the analysis which were subsequently clustered together to patterns and which progressively refined and developed the system of catgories and eventually, the analysis, of their connections (Saldaña 2009).

4. PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

4.1. Frontline work in the AMS (*Arbeitsmarktservice*) context in Vienna

4.1.1. "It's your own business…": Practitioners' self-conceptions

One first important dimension in the presentation of findings is the self-conception of frontline practitioners in activation services. The focus on the role of street-level practitioners is based on the assumption that they play a crucial role in the policy implementation process and that it is last but not least frontline practice which gives shape to a policy and determines its outcomes by the way the policy is interpreted in practice and "brought to the people". This perspective leads inevitably to the question how frontline practitioners see themselves in the policy and practice context. As it has been pointed out this focus is even more important in the case of policies which see in the provision of individualised services their core task.

Accordingly, in the interviews a lot of attention has been given to the thematic field of practitioners' self-conceptions, to the descriptions of what they are doing and to the interpretations of their role and mandate. The interviewees have been asked how they describe their activities and their role in the context of activation policies and services both in the interaction with service users and in describing their job to an outsider. But their self-conceptions emerge also from the very rich descriptions they have given of their daily practice and the different challenges they have to face. The interpretations practitioners give of their role and mandate are insofar crucial as they are related to all main aspects discussed in the interviews such as the offer of services, the interpretation of the notion of activation, the use of discretion, the relation with clients and, last but not least, the definition of success in this practice field.

A first important criterion is the orientation in the practitioners' representations of their mandate. Of course, idealtypical juxtapositions serve to point out different orientations and most of the time practitioners refer to different orientations as well as to the possible conflicts between them when they illustrate what their job is about. However, the emphasis in the interpretations of respondents differs along a continuum between a more user-oriented interpretation of the mandate and a more institutional and regulatory oriented interpretation of the mandate. Differences in the emphasis vary depending both on the target groups

practitioners are working with and on the challenges and difficulties practitioners have to face. Interestingly, the user orientation seems to be stronger in the representations of practitioners who work with young people or with regard to service users with less difficulties and higher capabilities and motivation. In user-oriented interpretations a strong emphasis is given to the dimension of creating an interpersonal relationship and to the notion of help and support.

Describing the initial contact of a counselling process, a practitioner who is working in the counselling zone (*Beratungszone)* of a special office for young people (*AMS Jugendliche*), e.g., points out:

> *"We become a bit acquainted with each other. I have to, I am not a social worker, I am not a psychologist, anyway I have to meet the needs of the young people. I see this as extremely important, to know what is distressing them in this situation. There has to be something which has brought them into the situation they are in. (...) The point is to find out with every user, at least for me it's like that, I cannot speak for all colleagues, but I try to find out with every client individually, what he or she needs. And I cannot move myself according to a certain scheme, I do not have a specific scheme."*

Very similar are the representations given by another practitioner in the same office, of how she understands her job:

> *"It's a matter of trust. That the person really learns to trust and then to say what is going on. If you have details and you know what's behind it, you can give better support. But it is difficult, because it is always a question of time, because we do not have enough time for the young people. (...) I am more the carer. I like to go into the details, because then it is easier for me. (...) I believe, that everybody has a different approach. The other one is more meticulous and others, like me, are more.. probably I even annoy the youngsters sometimes, because they say: 'I already have such a mummy at home, who is whining and grumbling!' But it is my approach, to appeal to their conscience. And others don't do that. They define concrete requirements and if someone does not stick to the rules then there is a sanction. Others try again anyway, one more time. 'Ok, let's try one more time, and then…' And I am probably one of these ones."*

Anyway, from both representations it turns out that there are different ways of interpreting this role and that the given mandate allows different ways of doing this job. Remarkably, most respondents who emphasise user orientation and underline the importance

of a helping relationship represent these dimensions as part of their very own approach remaining rather unclear if they conceive them as an integral part of a professional approach and a necessary professional interpretation of the given role or if the sensibility for these dimensions is rather a personal surplus to what the real job is about. As one practitioner points out the original definition of the job is that of an administrative activity and it depends on the different practitioner's interpretations in which direction it eventually goes.

> *"There are colleagues who are personally, how shall I define or say that, who are rather oriented towards the interest of the client, who go rather in the direction of social work, who often come from the social area and who perceive the job here in a different way. And then there are the colleagues, who perceive this job as it has been officially defined, I think: an administrative activity and support for quick job search and placement. It's different."*

Interestingly, if advisors come from a social work background this is often seen in a more critical way rather than considered an advantage. Apparently a social work approach is associated with being too "social" for frontline practice in activation services and related to a strong inclination to help people in a more comprehensive way and a lower ability to dissociate oneself from problematic situations. One practitioner makes the point:

> *"You don't have to be too social in your attitudes. But you should also be able to be comprehensive towards the people, who are sitting in front of you. Yes, it's hard for a social worker to do this job. We already had colleagues who came here from a social work background. Partly, they have gone away again. Because they said that they couldn't deliver that. They said: 'That's not my mentality!'"*

Practitioners from a social work background themselves see their background as an advantage either in relation to establishing and managing helping relationships or in terms of knowledge about the offer of different social services in the city on which they can give information to service users in need. However, a social work approach seems not to be necessarily associated with a more critical perspective on activation policy and practice, at least not explicitly.

In any case, in this first orientation pattern interpersonal relationship related terms are frequent and the focus remains mostly limited to the interpersonal dimension of help and support. Accordingly, critical remarks concern predominantly the available resources, especially the lack of time, which impede "doing more" in terms of relationship building and of finding out more about the personal situation of the users in order to offer more tailor-

made support. In this orientation pattern a critical awareness about the ambiguities of the mandate itself or of activation policies in a broader sense is less evident or at least less pronounced in the representations of practice. In this sense, this orientation is on the one hand clearly turned towards service users' needs, an individually aligned approach, and tailor-made offer of support. On the other hand, it could be argued that within this orientation pattern there is a higher risk of losing sight of problematic aspects of the policy context and the given mandate and to contribute indirectly to their concealment. Thus, such an orientation could likely become a functional support for the implementation process of debatable policy provisions by "giving them a human face".

In contrast, a more institutional and regulatory interpretation is clearer in pointing out what the given mandate is "really" about and what the constraints of the mandate are. This orientation pattern is given more emphasis in representations of practitioners who work with adults or in relation to less employable target groups who are perceived as more problematic, as having multiple difficulties in labour market integration or simply as less motivated or too "choosy" for a quick placement. More institutional and regulatory oriented representations focus on the limits of what practitioners can do and are in charge of. These representations appear mostly in relation to situations described as difficult or where practitioners think that they have to be anyway very clear about what their task is. A practitioner working with mixed adult target groups who is very aware and openly speaking of the tensions and limits in activation work, makes clear what the primary mandate of the job eventually is:

> *„(...) our primary mandate is to end unemployment as soon as possible. This is our primary mandate. (...) I can remember some counselling interviews, where I considered myself to be more on the other side of the table, ideologically at least. Where I can fully understand the point, where I say to the service user: 'That's all well and good, privately I do understand that, but you have to inform yourself about what the legal situation is. It is not our job to satisfy your wishes.' Of course sometimes you try to do it anyway. (...) Eventually, I work for the State. The State defines the goals for me and they are goals which offer something partly to the services users and partly to the State. It can be put this way. What you can also say is that it does not harm the service users, with a few exceptions."*

Another practitioner who also works with mixed adult target groups is even more clear what the mandate, or better what the institution itself is about.

> *"The terminology here at the AMS is often chosen in a wrong way. The basis on which we are working is the unemployment insurance legislation. That's just how it is. And our*

mandate is clear. So, it's difficult sometimes. They (service users U.N.) come here and say: 'Oh, counselling zone, here I can get advise!' But it's not about social policy. We are a mere labour market institution."

This affirmation is quite astonishing as one central aspect of activation is to strengthen the nexus between work and welfare and, hence, a stronger linking of labour market policies and social policies particularly in consideration of the fact, that all social assistance recipients of working age have to register at the Public Employment Service. What the practitioner probably wanted to underline with this affirmation is that the given support is clearly limited to the goal of ending unemployment (status) as soon as possible and quick labour market integration.

However, also practitioners who depict their job in a more institutional and regulatory pattern do not exclude user orientation and all of them declare that they try to be as supportive as possible within the limits of their mandate, even if they report that their "hands are often tied". Practitioners whose presentations of their job clearly point out the limits of what they are in charge of, seem to be often even more aware of the contradictions in their practice and of the notion of activation in general. But a very interesting point is that their argumentation differs in the way they deal with the constraints of their primary mandate on the one hand and the often problematic and challenging situations of service users on the other. A few practitioners recognize the limits of their mandate but at the same time point out that going beyond it is, or better would be, often necessary in order to achieve the aims of their job. In this sense, their critique is part of a more professional argumentation, although it is often presented as their personal opinion. But the point is that within this perspective a broader approach and a better responsiveness to "what lies behind" are seen as an appropriate dimension of a professional strategy to do this job. Accordingly, they criticize mainly the lack of time which hinders them in deepening their work with the clients and in focusing more on underlying aspects in order to give more specific and more enduring support and, eventually, also to perform better in their job. One of the interviewed practitioners puts it this way:

"I think we all know that priority has to be given to the job search or to support in looking for a job. We are in charge of that. But, if you see then that there is nothing going on, you know. After all, one begins to ask what this is due to. And often that's difficult to find out. And the time you have is often too short. Sometimes you have your own fantasies but you can

also be wrong with them. But generally, and that is now my own opinion, if you don't clarify the underlying things, he will never find a stable job."

Another practitioner from the office for young people bemoans the lack of time to better attend to the young people and the fact that, consequently, a lot of aspects cannot be considered or have to be offhanded over to other, external institutions while at least some colleagues would be capable of giving a more comprehensive assistance and, thus, also work more efficiently:

"Well, they would need more guidance. They would need more constant assistance. I am convinced that there are many many colleagues here at the AMS who have a lot of additional qualifications, who have the sensitivity for people and why shall I send them to an external institution, for having coaching elsewhere, when we could do that here by our own. Maybe even more efficiently. Well, that's what I criticise a bit. Which could be in fact difficult to handle, because some of us are capable to do that, others are not. That's difficult then. I think we pass too much into other hands, which would not be necessary. With young people particularly, it could be interesting to keep some things here in our own hands. If I had more time for certain service users, could attend to them better and call them here more often, if I had more appointments for them: 'Ok, then come back and we do this and that together, you show me..', I believe that I could work in a more effective way."

A second and even more pronounced line of argumentation within this more institutional and regulatory oriented pattern is different insofar as the dimension to be attentive and as responsive as possible to the individual situation within the given limits (or in extreme cases even beyond them) is not seen as a functional aspect within the given mandate. Rather it is represented as a mere personal concern or claim which has nothing to do and often even conflicts with the real aim of the job, i.e. to end unemployment (status) as soon as possible. This position is characterised by an explicit detachment of a person-oriented perspective from the primary mandate of the job. In this sense, the understanding of individual problems and the respect of difficulties is represented as a mere private accommodation, as part of a rather personal strategy aimed to find a personally agreeable way to do this job. This point is very interesting, as it shows how the mechanisms of individualisation and personalisation affect also practitioners. It could be argued that the structural difficulties and contradictions which are inherent in activation policies and which obviously concretise in the here and now of practice have to be dealt with in a rather individual and personal way. In fact, this argumentation pattern does not go along with an

uncritical position towards the difficulties and contradictions of practice. On the contrary, these practitioners seem to be particularly aware of the limits of what they can do in their job and at the same time very sensitive to the human encounter with service users in need. But they hardly find a way to deal with this tension within their mandate and it becomes their own and personal business how to cope with these difficulties. This is even more evident, as all of the interviewed practitioners emphasize a good working climate and the support they try to give each other among colleagues. Furthermore, some practitioners even underline the possibilities of support and supervision they can get from their employer. However, in the end this kind of support seems to remain geared to the individual dimension of how one can get along with the job on one's own and a dimension of collective discussion or contention seems to be rather missing. Eventually, it seems that the only real possibility practitioners have is to acquiesce to what the job is and to find a personal way and personal (and sometimes even hidden) strategies to go along with it in a way that remains somehow personally acceptable to them. Of course, these "personal solutions" can make a big difference for service users. One practitioner is very clear about that:

> *"No, basically, everybody knows these issues very well. We don't have to broadly discuss them or things like that. That's our daily reality. Of course my boss also knows that it is like that. (...) It's our daily bread. And it's every advisor's own business what he makes of it. To move oneself in this corset, because the parameters, the limits are simply given. Not by us. It's what you make of it, that's why it makes a huge difference which advisor you get as service user. You can get a fully motivated advisor, an ambitious one. You can also get someone who is despairing."*

In fact, the frequent issue of finding one's own way to do this job seems to be a very central aspect for all the frontline practitioners interviewed. All of them seem to be very keen to bring in their personality and to do their job in a humanly acceptable way. However, the given representations suggest that these issues are hardly confronted within a professional discussion or integrated as a necessary ethical reflection within the given role. Rather they seem to reside in a rather secluded, private sphere of one's own personality and one's very own concerns. Remarkably, the emphasis of the personal concerns goes along very frequently with hints that there exist also very different ways to do this job.

> *"What is ruled out for me is to ever become such a real asshole. The cliché public servant, who doesn't even look into people's eyes anymore, who is rude and so. Should I ever get that far, and I do not exclude that, because I am not a saint at all, then I will definitely look for*

something else. I know that. Because I simply define my job this way. Because it makes me even more furious than my clients, if I.. I cannot say a lot about that, but there, well, there are some colleagues, who don't have any manners, not at all. (...) Like I said, I've found a way for myself, which has not been given to me by my boss or by my employer. That it becomes viable and acceptable for me. And I am nonetheless good in my job. I really can say that. In a way, that I can still face myself in the mirror in some way. That I can go home and find sleep anyway."

In some cases practitioners make a clear juxtaposition between those who simply stick to the given rules without caring too much about human aspects and those who are more personally engaged, who try to see and to understand the individual person with his or her needs. At the same time, these practitioners admit that it might be easier for the former ones while the more attentive ones continue to be torn between given provisions and their personal concern for a more "human" approach.

„Often it's not easy. Yes. There are colleagues who simply stick to the statutory provisions and who come off best with that. And then there are persons and colleagues, who question a bit more what they are doing and who try to consider also the human aspect. And yes, so, that's that. How can you yourself deal with that? And with some people this has a bearing on their own health. Because then you are simply all torn up inside."

One practitioner tells that together with some colleagues they invented their own categorisation of people working at the AMS very early, during their training course at the beginning of their AMS career.

„We were a group, back then, a very interesting group. (...) And we noticed somehow that, uhm, that there.. I don't even know if I should say that. That there are three types of people working at the AMS. There are those ones, who do that because they come from the social area and who hope to be effective with the young people, to bring them into a job and who have maybe their feelings of success in that. Then there are people working at the AMS, who have always done that and who simply don't know what else to do. And then there are the people, who maybe feel a sort of satisfaction, if they can thump the table and say: 'That's the way you have to do it!' Who somehow want to have this feeling of power. (...) Yes, as I've said. But I must not speak about that and I even cannot speak concretely about that. We defined that more for us, just for fun, back then."

Quite often the risk to disregard the human aspect is associated to the length of service and to an increasing blunting of feelings over the years.

> *„A lot of people are working at the AMS for a long time, over 20 years. They have become dull in their feelings. Honestly, this has to be said. Hence, yes, maybe then they don't see the person directly or so, but yes, I don't know, if you have already quit inside because at a certain point the job has annoyed you but you have not changed it, then you can perceive that in the interaction with service users."*

As the cited interview sections already show, the challenge to find one's own way is on the one hand associated with the personal concern for a certain mode to behave and to interact with service users. On the other, it is clearly associated also with one's own need to make some sense of the job and to survive in a way in it. Especially practitioners with more lengthy service at the AMS emphasize the need to come to grips with the challenges of the job in order to sustain it in the long term and to see still some sense in what they are doing.

> *"For me it has always been important to find at least some meaning in what I am doing. This is still important for me. And this is partly difficult enough here. But you can still make something out of it, as adviser with commitment. (…) As I've said, you need a high frustration tolerance in this job. Without that you won't make it very long. And I've seen a lot of people coming and going. Really. But I can also say, that if you do it right and in a clever way, you don't even have to breach any rules."*

Practitioners with more length of service are also able to witness changes in the given provisions and in the working conditions. In this context practitioners report that nowadays there is a higher pressure to end the unemployment status of clients within a certain time and to perform in line with the given parameters and provisions. This means that it becomes more difficult to go deeper into the individual situation and, thus, to offer an individualised and more comprehensive service. A practitioner who is working in this job for a very long time (about 20 years) names this very clearly. Though, she underlines that the way to approach people should often be different. But here again this issue is eventually attributed to a question of the personal character.

> *„When I arrived here, at the beginning, I mean, of course the goal has always been to bring people into work. That's logical. That's our main task. But back then the order was not that this one has to be in a job within 3 months and the other one has to be in a job within 6*

months. It wasn't like that. (...) That's not possible anymore, to go into that. Where I said: Ok, I have time and if I cannot help him myself I can send him to another counselling centre and they clear that to a point that I can go on working with him afterwards. But I'd wish that, nonetheless, some colleague would simply, that the approach would be another one. But this is simply a question of personality, I think."

Also another practitioner who has been doing this job already for a longer time (about 10 years), agrees that the difficulties have increased. Nonetheless, he points out, that for him the job has become easier, because he changed his views on certain aspects. Asked if the job has become more difficult over the years, he answers:

"Yes. But not for me personally. Because I changed my mind as to certain issues. For I was, after my training year, I was quite close to burn out. That has to do with my very own views or with my own mode of thinking."

The interviewed practitioners were also asked how they would describe their job to an outsider who does not really have an insight into what it is about and what it means. Also in these responses the issue of help is at the heart of the given descriptions and the dimension of the interpersonal and helping relationship is depicted as being fundamental in this job. To commit oneself to service users' individual needs and to offer a proper individualised service is at the forefront of the given descriptions and it is also within this dimension that practitioners define success and satisfaction of what they are doing. However, here again those who work with young people place even more emphasis on these aspects.

„Most of the time, I say that I am working with very interesting young people, that I give them advice with regard to their professional future or their current professional situation. I say that it's a lot of fun to do that, that I see a lot and that it is a great experience for me!"

"What I like about this job are, after all, the interpersonal relationships and the possibility to help – to say so – other people. To show perspectives and to give support, to maybe point a different way or a new way, to dare something and to allow some change for themselves. Because sometimes that's one of the difficulties, too. Yes, to help, to say so. I should rather call it support. With a huge offer of possibilities, additional support and institutions which are at our disposal. That's fun."

Some practitioners point out that they come into contact with very different people in very different situations, sometimes even with people in really problematic situations, with

people who have multiple difficulties and for whom unemployment is only one and often even not the most pressing problem. The interviewed practitioners reported many stories of this kind, where they have to consider the broader picture of a persons' situation. They report that often they get to the real problems only by and by, when they see that it does not work with the job search or with the attendance of training or qualification courses. Sometimes, they understand only after a while that there are other underlying problems, e.g. housing problems, problems of mental health or addiction, the fact that a person cannot read and write or the fact that a person is living without electricity, as it has been pointed out in the different stories. In these cases practitioners have to recognize that labour market integration or training are not primary goals and often even not realistic, at least in the short term. The interviewed practitioners emphasise, that in these cases it is necessary to respect people's difficulties and not to demand things which are simply not possible. Thus, they underline that what you have to do is to pull the person somehow through without creating too many additional difficulties, and to try to put the person in contact with other services where he or she can get help. Also in this context all the interviewed practitioners emphasise the demand for a human aspect, however, again this is represented more in terms of a rather personal concern and endeavour and less as an integral part of a professional mandate. Interestingly, at the same time, some practitioners depict in a broader and more comprehensive approach and in the multifaceted encounters with individually different situations the interesting and, eventually, also the personally satisfying aspects of the job.

What emerges clearly is, thus, that working with people in a comprehensive way and on the basis of a helping and supporting relationship are at the heart of the representations of practice. At the same time this central aspect is often clearly limited by the given rules practitioners have to follow. The interesting point is that the need to cope with the resulting tensions and contradictions is depicted predominantly as a challenge which risks to fall back and to be dealt with on a rather personal level. This can even bring about different representations of the job, a more official one and a more personal (or more hidden) one. Asked about the representations of the job given to an outsider, one practitioner makes the point:

> *"If he is a very good friend of mine I tell him the whole truth. My truth. My account of things. But generally you can say it like this: I nonetheless see myself as someone who can give support. Maybe not always the way the service users themselves want it, but in a way that I still can say, it has been a kind of support. Within the limits of my possibilities."*

This marginalisation of central challenges to an individualistic and rather personal than professional sphere of finding one's own way is even more remarkable as some practitioners are, at the same time, quite explicit about the structural nature of the conflicts they have to face. One aspect pointed out in this context concerns the double-faced nature of the AMS itself. On the one hand it is represented as user-oriented service provider, on the other it is a public agency in charge of sovereign public functions, i.e. the implementation of unemployment insurance legislation and the exercise of the respective functions of control and sanction. In this sense, the AMS itself is represented as a rather ambiguous entity whose double-faced nature is broken down to the practitioners' mandate and which, eventually, unfolds in practice, especially in the interactions with those service users who are most disadvantaged in terms of their employability.

> *„Yes, you should be clear on that. Are you a public agency which is implementing statutory provisions and exercises sanctions and where your order is to stick them into a course for 6 month or to place them on the labour market? Or are you a service provider, where you are committed to users and try to do your best in their interest or at least in the interest of all parties involved? I think, the AMS doesn't even know itself what it is. Actually, we are a service provider with statutory character, but this is highly contradictory. If I cancel their benefits, I cannot claim to be a service provider. (…) But I feel myself more as a service provider."*

> *"What's a constant issue for me is this permanent tension. This schizophrenic situation between public agency and service provider. So that what is required by statute can be accepted, understood by the service users. Needless to say that you have to inform them about that. But information needs time. And there we have the next problem. To inform a service user unhurriedly about what we have to do and about what his duties and rights are and at the same time be service oriented and customer friendly… That's always.. partly a difficult balancing act we have to carry out. And very often we cannot even accomplish that."*

One practitioner points out, that in the end, people do not really have the choice and that the practice of activation is often characterised, at least to some extent, by a coercive context.

> *"They cannot go somewhere else. There's just the AMS. To get the benefit, unemployment benefit, unemployment assistance (Notstandshilfe) and even social assistance, I have to go to the AMS. There's simply no voluntary basis. At the same time it is defined, even legislation speaks about voluntary registration, voluntary access, no compulsion and so on. But this,*

yes, you are always caught between two stools. That's it, every day. And you cannot even learn that. It can't be grasped in any training you get. You learn that painfully."

While the balancing out of this tension between statutory authority and service orientation seems to be represented as a rather individual business, the PES itself emphasizes its service orientation, not only in its official representations towards the public, but also by giving high importance to the results of its Client Monitoring System which are part of the definition of the corporate goals and integrated in the Balanced Score Card on which the different local offices are assessed by the controlling system. This is seen rather skeptically by the practitioners who perceive the structural contradictions as a constant tension in their daily practice.

"What is given a huge weight by now, are the CMS results. This Client Monitoring System where customer satisfaction is assessed. And it goes that far, that this comes into the Balanced Score Card on the basis of which premiums (Leistungsprämien) are even given to single offices. Thus, schizophrenic! To improve customer satisfaction, but doing your job as statutory agency. Often this doesn't go together. There are statutory laws we simply have to execute. It's obvious that I do not increase customer satisfaction if I block someone's benefits. Or if I don't satisfy someone's qualification aspirations. Because often they simply cannot do that. (...) It's quite difficult to increase customer satisfaction then."

Summing up, the given representations show that the ambiguities and contradictions of activation both in the formal and the operational dimension of policy eventually crop out on the concrete level of practice and in the direct interaction with service users. The given representations suggest that the demanding and the enabling dimension of activation policies as well as the double faced nature of the institutions for their implementation, constitute a field of tension in which practice has to be unfolded and oriented. What is quite striking is that these challenges are mainly depicted in terms of a personal effort at getting along and finding one's own way. Although the given representations emphasise prevalently the issues of help and support and the helping relationship with service users, they also suggest that this dimension is clearly associated to a rather private sphere of personal concerns than to a professional strategy and that it often conflicts with the given provisions and rules. The quite colourful representations given by practitioners show that conflicts and tensions are perceived as the daily bread of practice and as personally challenging. The point is that the need to cope with them remains also there, at the level of a personal challenge. In this sense, it turns out that the mechanisms of individualisation and personalisation are also affecting

practitioners themselves and exposing them to a precarious form of self-reliance in their job. If there was to be a debate on the professionalisation of "activation work", this is a central point which should be seriously taken into account.

4.1.2. "I want to bring into employment as many as possible …"
The orientation towards work and the interpretations of activation

As pointed out, at the heart of activation policies lies the idea of a stronger nexus between work and welfare and, thus, the priority given to paid work as primary access to social security and participation. It has been argued, that this idea fits well into existing normative patterns and social practices which suppose citizens to be self-responsible for their welfare and self-sufficient through labour market participation. Against this background, political strategies focus on the one hand on the removal of options for labour market exit and unconditional benefit receipt, on the other on enabling elements to overcome individual barriers to labour market integration. Accordingly, activation strategies have become the linchpin in labour market and social policy reforms all over Europe and the reorganisation and the offer of Public Employment Services are given high priority on the policy agenda. But what are the orientations of the practitioners who are placed on the frontline of activation services and who are concerned concretely, and as has been pointed out, very personally with the labour market integration of unemployed people and with improving their lacking employability due to long-term unemployment, poor skills or wider personal problems? How is this mandate to overcome individual barriers to employment and the orientation towards work contextualised by frontline practitioners and which interpretations of the notion of activation goes along with their understanding of what they are doing on the frontline of activation services?

4.1.2.1. The orientation towards work

The findings suggest that, in principle, frontline practitioners agree on the priority given to paid work as primary access to social participation and social security and on the policy strategies aimed at activating citizens to bear the responsibility to make their living and welfare through labour market participation. In this sense, practitioners seem to agree about general policy goals of active labour market policies and to identify themselves with the institutional mandate given to them as advisors in the Public Employment Service. This

general consent might be considered as rather obvious, because the idea of activation seems to be, at least on the level of discourses, in line with existing ideas about responsibility and reciprocity in society which constitute also the key normative features in the debate on the responsibilities and limits in the organisation of social solidarity and, thus, also on the adjustment of the welfare state. Furthermore, it can be taken for granted that people who work as frontline practitioners in public services do or even have to agree at least to a certain extent to the main normative ideas which are constitutive for the given policy and practice context. In fact, all interviewed practitioners frame their representations in a way which shows that they agree, at least very generally, on the given mandate and, thus, on what they have, eventually, to stand for at the frontline. One practitioner underlines explicitly:

> *„I want to bring into employment as many as possible, that's even my goal and I am doing what I can for that. I cannot do more than that. I cannot create jobs and I cannot bring the users to job interviews. What I can do is to stick to certain rules. Not only those of the AMS but also mine, where I say: ‚Ok, this and that has to be done, than it is ok.' I cannot do more. But what I can do I do. And thus I don't feel under pressure. Because I have the same goals for myself and that's what I am working for all the time. (...) I don't know if it's like this for everyone, I don't think so, but I believe, that my views and opinions correspond with those of the AMS. I already knew that before I started working here. That they are fitting well, yes, maybe not a hundred percent, but it's ok. (...) And my way of working reflects that."*

However, frontline practitioners are those who see most directly and, indeed, in person critical aspects and limits of activation strategies and experience them as limits of what they can do in their daily interactions with service users. As already shown, these aspects are pointed out prevalently in relation to difficult situations or stories of service users with less chances and possibilities for labour market integration. This doesn't mean that practitioners define problems only as individual problems and neglect structural aspects. They do refer to changing conditions on the labour market, to the difficulties of certain branches and regions as well as the disappearance of certain types of jobs. However, these remarks remain mainly related to the sphere of difficulties as individual experiences, both by service users and by practitioners themselves, rather than associated to a critical discussion of policy aims and strategies in a broader sense. In this sense, knowledge about structural problems is present, though, it seems to stay rather in the background. Here it could be argued, that this is quite obvious as the policy is perceived as given and as the challenges practitioners have to deal with in practice are concrete problems of individual persons in very different situations.

However, it is also in practice that the divergence between pretence and reality eventually arises, that policy goals reveal themselves as not realistic in relation to certain target groups or situations and that, in the end, practitioners cannot perform according to the projected outputs. But as the findings suggest, the handling of these divergences and tensions does hardly take place in terms of a politicisation of practice and on the level of collective action. Rather the handling of these critical aspects is delimited within the practitioner-user relationship and, as has been pointed out already, even within this dimension there is limited space for a professional regime and a high risk that the handling of difficulties and tensions eventually fall back to a rather personal dimension of finding one's own way to get this job done in a personally acceptable manner. One the one hand this "human", but actually rather "private" engagement might be considered a very positive element and in fact, all the interviewed practitioners are for sure keen to give their (their!) best in this job. On the other hand, from a more critical point of view, there might be some problematic aspects which have to be taken into account as well. First of all, as has already been pointed out, this "personalisation" of frontline practice could be more at risk of legitimising debatable political strategies and the concealment of power structures by giving them a "human face" and by compensating policy contradictions with personal dedication. Furthermore, this leads to the quite contradictory situation that on the one hand practitioners are officially not seen (and do often even not consider themselves) as active part in the policy implementation chain with the possibility to influence the process of policy making, even less in a two-way direction. On the other hand, the dimension of street level interaction seems to be at the same time a decisive dimension and a crucial moment for the concretisation of processes of inclusion or exclusion. But the challenge of "getting the job done" rather fails to be dealt with openly and within a professional realm. It remains, on the contrary, rather marginalised in relation to a dimension of personal (and often even hidden) endeavour. Against this background, it can be understood that in the forefront of representations stand difficulties as individual experiences of both service users and practitioners. In fact, despite an awareness of structural problems in the back of practitioners' minds, difficulties are rarely depicted as problematic policy aspects or linked with questioning the general narratives of the activation paradigm. In this sense, issues such as the narrow conception of work as only paid work in the (first) labour market, the possibility and reasonability of the general extension of an idealtypical universal adult worker model to very different target groups, and the general assumption that people have to be "activated" to work are rarely touched and basically hardly questioned by frontline practitioners. What is often stressed by practitioners is that

with certain target groups it is rather impossible to accomplish the policy goal of labour market integration, particularly within the given time limits. This critique is made prevalently in relation to social assistance recipients who have to comply with compulsory registration at the Public Employment Service and who are often perceived as having multiple difficulties, as hard to place or as the furthest from the labour market. In this sense, the introduction of the new national social assistance scheme, the so called new means-tested minimum income scheme (Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung) is perceived as a significant policy change which has direct consequences for frontline practitioners as they have to deal with new target groups. In fact, one of the core elements of the new minimum income scheme is to enhance the active inclusion of people furthest from the labour market in line with the objectives of the Public Employment Service.

> *"It (the new means-tested minimum income scheme, U.N.) has been introduced last year in September, I think, and since then we have a lot of people, for instance, who have never been at the AMS before, who haven't ever worked at all. Who maybe are in Austria for 20 years and who maybe do not even speak German, and now they have to be registered here. That's it, that we got new groups of people who otherwise would never have registered themselves here."*

Practitioners depict critical aspects mainly as "practical" difficulties of working with the furthest from the labour market with the given instruments and within the given time limits pointing out the divergence between general policy goals and what is effectively possible in practice.

> *"Yes, with the introduction of the new minimum income scheme it has changed insofar as we have to do something even with these people. (...) We got them, too. But, yes, they are even more difficult to assist than those we already had. They brought in new measures for this purpose, though, I'd rather say that this target group is so difficult that you cannot realistically assume that they are in the right place here at the AMS. As I've already said before, there would be needed another organisation. It's particularly difficult to work with them in a goal compliant way. They cost us a lot of time and they cause a lot of frictions as they are not even used to have a daily routine, for 10 or 20 years. (...) They are definitely not placeable or assistable by us, with the instruments we have."*

Often the representations focus mainly on the difficulties of target groups and their wrong understandings of what being registered at the AMS means rather than on the

difficulties inherent to the policy itself and its basic assumptions, which turn out to be problematic in practice.

> *"It's a very particular clientele, yes, social assistance recipients. (...) They very often have serious limits. (...) There you have to inform the users immediately what the real matter of our daily job here is. What we have to do. I often had customers, where I said: 'Sorry, we have to sign you off. You are actually not allocatable. You are not available for the labour market, for the AMS.' It's defined by law for how much they have to be available for the labour market. Where then often comes the question: 'Oh, great, and what shall I do now?! Where can I get my money?' Thus, a completely different understanding. Where I have to remind them that it's actually about ending unemployment, not about securing one's livelihood. Yes, we are doing that, too. But only on the way to employment. Actually, customers could be registered at the AMS only if it's in fact possible for the AMS to end unemployment."*

However, it seems most likely in relation to the introduction of the new means-tested minimum income scheme that the policy is being questioned, even though critique is rather indirect and refers in the first instance to the improper target groups who have no realistic chances on the labour market and who are brought to the Public Employment Service by the new policy, even though, as it is stated, in practice it often turns out that it is not the right place for them.

Anyway, the divergence between the pretense of labour market integration and the difficulties many people have to face in practice, is pointed out also in relation to other target groups with different problems such as health or addiction problems or people who do not have a good report, such as people released from the prison. The interviews are full of references to such stories which show the consistent dilemma frontline practitioners have to face. On the one hand, they are supposed (and keen themselves) to take into account individual situations and needs and to be flexible and responsive for an indivisualised service provision. On the other hand, they have to process people within the limits of a given time schedule and of given rules and they have to head always towards the same goal, i.e. to end unemployment as soon as possible and to bring people (back) into the first labour market. But as practitioners point out a narrow orientation toward employment in the first labour market is often simply not possible.

> *„Of course there are also those ones who have already been in employment for years, who are here for a short time and who do exactly know: ‚Ok, I'd like to do this training or to*

acquire that qualification because it would be good for my career.' They come here, too, of course. But they are here for a short time, they come and go. Thank God! Those who continue to stay here are those who have addiction problems, and that's quite a big group also among young people, those who have been in prison. And there it's difficult. These are the groups who are stuck here. And to speak with them about training, you know, especially with people who are on substitution treatment, that's impossible. (...) There are people who are simply not in the conditions, where I have to say, ok if they attend their appointments and stick somehow to the rules, at the beginning that's ok for me. And then, slowly you can ask more. Yes, in these cases, I cannot speak about training. I can talk with them, I can say: 'Ok, it's good that you are here now, how's it going?' If they are getting worse I can encourage them to make a withdrawal, a residential detoxification. If afterwards it works, If they don't relapse, then you can speak about work, start to search. But at the beginning… That's it."

"But which employer takes someone with heavy addiction problems? (...) We have people with drug addiction problems who haven't got any… Also people who are clean, who made it, they still haven't got any chance in society. Or someone who has been in prison. If he served his sentence, he even could be the best person ever now, if the repute is not ok, he hasn't got any chance at all, right?"

But as frontline practitioners underline, the problem of not being job ready does not only concern people who are considered as the furthest from the labour market or people with serious health and social problems. As pointed out by practitioners working in the special office for young people, also a lot of the young people who come to the counselling zone are far from being job ready and, thus, the real challenge is often to lay the proper groundwork.

"Generally, I have the impression, yes, I would say that the young people who are registered here are rather the ones who are having troubles in some way. Not necessarily something real urgent, but I would say that from the ones I have in mind now, yes, that there are maybe 2 or 3 out of 10, where I would say that they are right away job ready. (...) I don't have a lot of work with those who are job ready. They don't even come to my mind when I am talking here with you. Most of the times, you don't have them here very long, they often look for jobs by their own. That's a rather easy game with them, there you rather just say: 'Hello, how do you do? What's up?'"

„I'd say that it is the majority and not the exception, where you have previous problems which have to be solved at first. Separate from the fact, that the counselling zone is the

catchment basin for those who are difficult to place. Those who are job ready, who have successfully finished their vocational training and where it's only about finding a job, they come to the service zone and they do not even arrive here."

"Because we have lots of people here who are not really job ready. To whom you can say: 'Here you go.' But there's a lot of groundwork to do. They have to be oriented, to be coached, there are lots of things they have to get a grip on before."

In summary, the findings show that, despite the many difficulties in practice, practitioners rarely problematise them in a broader policy context. They seem to share in principle the basic policy ideas and in this sense also the narrow focus of orientation towards gainful work in the first labour market, even though they directly experience the critical aspects and indeed the limits of such a narrow approach. Accordingly, problems are rather represented as individual problems rather than as critical aspects of the policy. The basic normative patterns of the activation paradigm are not really questioned and also references to alternative possibilities of occupational integration outside the first labour market are fairly rare.

However, what is interesting are the interpretations of the concept of activation which emerge from the given representations and in relation to depicted target groups and problems. These different orientation patterns differ along a continuum and depend on how target groups and individual situations are perceived.

4.1.2.2. Activation as qualification

A first interpretation pattern can be labeled as qualification. Mainly in relation to young people or to people who are seen as highly motivated, practitioners underline the importance to offer and to support possibilities of qualification in order to enhance service users' chances for stable labour market integration and better employment. In this interpretation pattern emphasis is given to offer an individualised service, to take into account individual dispositions and aspirations and to understand in which direction an individualised project of support should be developed. It's mainly within this interpretation pattern that practitioners identify a dimension of professional expertise which is represented as understanding individual needs and dispositions and as being able to respond with an appropriate matching and a concrete offer of enabling support which can be made productive on the labour market in the future. In this context practitioners also underline the broad variety of courses and qualification measures which can be both offered by the AMS itself or

bought in by different training providers, especially for specific target groups such as young people or women who want to reenter the labour market.

> *„The offer we have her in Vienna is incredible. For me that's so positive because you can really be individually responsive. So you don't have to send them just in any job application course, may be for five times, but you can really say: 'Ok, these are his affinities and inclinations, that's still missing, there we can hook into, here we have an offer which fits in well. And then this helps him on."*

> *"Yes, it's definitely offered a lot for young people. And that's good and right like this. Just as for women who want to reenter the labour market or generally for women."*

However, what is often criticised in this context, is that the labour market does not offer enough apprenticeship positions for young people. So the priority to target on qualification is often hampered by the available training positions on the labour market. What, in contrast, is seen as a very positive offer is the possibility of special intensive vocational trainings (*Facharbeiterintensivausbildungen*) which allows unskilled workers to catch up on a skilled labour qualification within a compacted time span.

Within this orientation pattern of qualification, a central feature of practitioners expertise is seen in having a good overview and knowledge about the offer of services, courses and qualification measures in order to give a fitting response to service users. This interpretation pattern clearly reflects the enabling dimension of activation and of a social investment approach. Thus, practitioners see their professional task in making a proper assessment of individual needs, declinations and aspirations in order to offer tailor made support which shall pay off in the future. In this context, especially in relation to young people, practitioners emphasise the importance of orientation and career guidance. As they point out, especially young people do often have limited knowledge about labour market conditions and development and about which professional sectors offer good chances to find employment. They also report that very often young people, especially those without a higher education background, are very limited in their imaginations about their professional future, that they often continue to be oriented towards very classical and often very stereotypically gender-related career aspirations. In these cases, practitioners try to orient young people also towards alternative options, to show them the variety of possibilities and to understand with them in which direction they could go to realise somehow their aspirations and talents on the one hand, and to have a chance to find a job on the other.

„It's a pity that many youngsters either don't have any idea at all or have only very restricted information about which jobs exist, which schools exist and which chances you have once you finished them. Of course, nobody can guarantee a hundred percent that I will get a job, even if I study. (...) I don't know if you can change that, but it's like this, hairdresser, sales girl, secretary, these are the jobs for the girls. And I think, that there would be a lot of other jobs which they would be well suited to. But they are afraid in some way, they don't dare do to that. (...) Yes, I often use the FiT programme (Women in Technology). Only the word technology sparks panic, they gape their eyes in horror. Really!"

„We have this kind of black list, I mean it's not black, because it's not generally forbidden, but it's evaluated every year which training programmes have been paid end which of them ended in employment. And there is a list of jobs we cannot sponsor, ambulance men, nail designer, aesthetician, these dream jobs, kindergarten nurse. I don't know, lots of young women want to became kindergarten nurse, and the boys fitness coach. But the situation on the job market is so bad, that they probably wouldn't get a job after their training."

However, while in relation to young people practitioners emphasise the importance of training and the priority to catch up on a marketable qualification, in relation to adult people there seem to be much more restrictions. Practitioners who work with adult target groups point out that they can often not satisfy the qualification aspirations of the service users either because they cannot be considered as marketable or because they simply have to follow the proceedings for bringing the unemployed into a job as soon as possible, also against the will of service users.

„Last week, for instance, I had a customer who is a qualified cook and waiter, who had already worked as executive chef. (...) He is perfectly qualified for sure, but he said that he cannot stand in the kitchen one more day. And that he, actually, wants to be a photographer. And he was already very well informed. It wasn't just an unrealistic desire. He would have been absolutely willing to do that, to invest money, etc. But it gets difficult for me. If you know just a bit the labour market and the labour demand and so. That doesn't go together with what I have to do. And I have to say to him: 'Listen, that'sall well and good, but I am going to place you anyway as cook or as waiter.' (...) This is a customer's desire which has nothing to do with the economic-political mandate we have."

„First of all, after 100 days of registration runs out this occupational protection (Berufsschutz). Yes, then it actually says: active placement in every reasonable working-field. And reasonable is, very simply, everything which is paid according collective agreements and what doesn't infringe one's health and offend against morality."

"In principle, he have actually to verify, if a registration (at the AMS) is possible. If the person is unemployed, in the classical sense. The definition of unemployed is exactly like this. Unemployed is who has no job, who is living in Austria, who can work, is disposable and willing to work. So we often have a problem, as our primary task is, actually, to end unemployment as soon as possible. That's our primary mandate. This often leads to situations, which I can fully understand from a human point of view, where users come and say: 'I know, I don't have finished any education or training and my chances on the labour market are not the best, but I simply cannot do certain things. I can't hack it to just stand in an assembly line or to clean toilets or whatever, I don't know, to fill the shelves at Billa's. I expected more in my life.' And they often refuse themselves against this. I mean, maybe they fit well into a certain target group, maybe women who want to reenter employment, for instance, for whom the AMS offers a lot. Or young people, for whom it is tried to respond with quite a lot of measures. That's it."

However, although in some cases the goal to end unemployment as soon as possible conflicts with service users' qualification aspirations and, in the end, also with the proclaimed service orientation. Qualification seems to be a central interpretation pattern in activation work. This orientation pattern is certainly attended by a social investment approach which assigns to frontline practitioners the role of brokers who have to make a good assessment of service users situations and abilities and to bring them together with the right qualification measures supposed to pay off in the future. In fact, practitioners highly identify themselves in this role and it seems to be the dimension competences and the "artistry" of this job are mostly attached to. However, this focus and the strong orientation towards qualification might be also at risk to invest mainly in those target groups who are supposed as the most promising ones and as those who are most likely to make it. In this sense, this strong orientation towards qualification among practitioners might be also at risk to abet creaming effects in activation work.

4.1.2.3. Activation as motivation

A second identified interpretation pattern can be labeled as motivation. In this interpretation pattern the main focus lies less on finding an appropriate offer of qualification

but rather on stimulating the right personal attitudes and basic transversal skills and competences required for work and labour market integration. However, motivation is still represented in a rather positive way, as empowerment and supporting stimulus to familiarise service users to a working life. This pattern emerges mainly in relation to service users who have never worked yet, such as young people, or service users who were outside the labour market for a certain time but who are supposed to make it if they learn to adapt themselves to basic requirements of gainful employment. Within this interpretation pattern emphasis is given mainly to a supporting relationship while more concrete aspects of a qualification or career planning process stand, at least initially, in the background. In this interpretation pattern the activating role of practitioners is often seen in getting people to have a daily routine, to encourage them and to make them realise that the effort to search for a job or to start a training for a better qualified position can offer new perspectives even in a broader sense, for their autonomy and well-being.

> *"The device is to fire them up time and again. To motivate. But yes, sometimes even with a wagging finger. (...) Unfortunately, one of the difficulties is that many of them can live with social assistance or with the little money they get from us. So they don't see an incentive. Then you have to tell them that now they get this little money 12 times (a year, U.N.). If they go to work, they get it 14 times. Yes. Aren't there any aims and ambitions? To travel, to have a car, hobbies? What you cannot afford to do now? Yeah, often you have to do it like this."*

Especially in relation to young people there seems to be a strong link between a more qualification and a more motivation oriented interpretation pattern. In fact, as a practitioner in the special office for young people points out, also in special vocational trainings (*überbetriebliche Lehrausbildung*) the first steps consist often prevalently in motivational efforts in order to guide the young people in the right direction.

> *"And then, for people who have very big difficulties to find employment on the labour market, there are these special vocational trainings, as alternative. Actually, often it is rather a starting shot. That they, how shall I say, that they get a daily routine. That they have to go there, so that they get up in the morning and it was like going to work. Basically, it is like going to work. In these trainings they sign an apprenticeship contract and have the same rights and duties as an apprentice, vocational training school included. And for many of them it's just this first step. Then they look for an apprenticeship position on the labour market, to which they can switch over. Often it is just about starting with something. I can badly describe that… That you say: 'Yes, now there is something for you. Here you go!' To*

make a first step outside the front door. And then the next steps go automatically. And then it works also with finding an apprenticeship position. To get out of this lethargy. (…) Yes, to shove them and so. Some of them need this. There are those who come and who are full of vim and energy and everything goes smoothly, and then there are those who need someone, who says: 'Come on!', who pushes them again and again."

It's mainly in relation to the target group of young people that the importance of motivation is emphasised. Practitioners point out that often they have to be shown "how the wind blows" and so they represent their motivational role also in the pictographic way of giving them some kicks from time to time. However, although sometimes even strong expressions are used in these representations, the motivation pattern is distinguished by an encouraging tenor and strong emphasis on a supporting relationship.

"I mean, I do not mince my words at all. I often speak also in dialect and I lay it on the line. But I've got the impression that they do understand it this way. Of course sometimes I even say: 'You really need a kick in your ass every morning, or the splashy washrag right in your face to make something go on with you!' But they can take that. In fact, I don't have a lot of stress with that, thank God!"

But practitioners are also aware that motivation has its limits. They report that very often especially young people have ideas or aspirations which cannot realistically be achieved with the given qualifications and skills. In these cases practitioners describe their task also as getting them down, as making them realize that certain aspirations are not reasonable or simply not possible.

"Sometimes activation is also manipulation. That's just how it is. (…) This is really a very delicate point. Because my approach is basically the one of positive endorsement. But when someone is sitting here and he or she was in the lowest ability group (Leistungsgruppe) in the general school (Hauptschule) or in the technical school with only fours (lowest grades) and wants to become pharmaceutical assistant, at the chemist's, you know, or to work in an office. Then I would have to say: 'Hello, wake up! No way! Never ever! Your grades are too bad for that.' And that's hard for me. Because I never know.. On the one hand it's my job because I have to work in a way that realistically concerns the labour market. (…) But it's hard for me. Some of them really have a wrong self-awareness. They overrate themselves or maybe it is the youthful awarelessness. Or because they haven't had any experiences on the labour market yet or the simply don't know how the wind blows. And this is often frustrating, I think, when you almost have to demotivate people. Do you understand what I mean?"

In some cases practitioners point out that it can be rather problematic or even cynic to motivate people to something which probably will not happen and that their motivational efforts can be immediately destroyed if people get in contact with the harsh reality of the labour market.

> *"Who does take these people? What shall I do to make them not lose their motivation? I've had a customer now, he went to a job interview and they told him that he is a lost cause! I got sick! I've had him as my customer for a few months and we've been looking, he found his own apartment in the meantime, he is really looking for a job, he shows me his own initiative. He goes, he makes applications by himself. He has a big robbery behind him. But that's past. Now we have to build something new. And he is trying to set up something, he applies for a job and the person in front of him says: 'No. You are a lost cause, go and speak with your counsellor.' And I stand here and I get so furious because I think that it cannot be like this! All the work, the effort I made is fucked up, so that it cannot work. Because that's enough sometimes. In this case I've tried to put that aside and to that tell him that I have the feeling that it is not like this. And I pointed him out what he was able to achieve since I knew him. I hope it was useful!"*

The findings suggest that motivation constitutes a central feature of activation work and that practitioners highly identify themselves in the role of giving motivational support and of encouraging and empowering people in finding their way to employment. Especially in relation to certain target groups (mainly those ones who are also of main political interest, such as young people), motivation is seen as an important dimension in the direct contact with service users and a lot of resources are dedicated (available) to bring them in the right direction and to equip them with the right attitudes and dispositions for a working life. However, also in this very crucial orientation pattern the frame of reference is a rather individualistic one, namely the one of individual success, of making the individual fit for work under the conditions of the given labour market. Thus, the focus is on the single person with his or her difficulties, dispositions and motivations and his or her efforts to work on them. Of course, this is pivotal in the direct interaction with service users. The problem is that, in the end, individual success depends on more than a motivated self with the right attitudes and skills. Frontline workers perfectly know that and service users experience it as well, often very harshly. Thus, motivation is certainly important but it has also its limits. The representations given by practitioners clearly show that they are aware of the risk that their motivational efforts can easily go nowhere or be shot down very quickly by the real

conditions on the labour market. Thus, practitioners need to find the difficult balance between motivating people on the one hand and being realistic without raising hopes to something which won't happen. Certainly, this tension stands at the heart of activation work, but the problem is that it basically fails to be contemplated both in the officially proclaimed service orientation of the Public Employment Service and in the given frame of reference and action of frontline practice. Thus, activation work, even understood and represented in the positive way of motivational support, risks to become part of a functional strategy of subjectification without taking into account structural constraints. What is problematic in relation to frontline practice is, here again, that there seems to be very limited possibilities of a reflexive handling of these critical aspects within the realm of practitioners' given mandate and that it falls rather back to the practitioners as persons and their very private sense of appropriateness to deal with these difficulties and to avoid rather escapist scenarios of unrealistically or even cynically motivating people who have very little chances. In these sense, a professional realm in activation work is hardly associated to link individual and structural problems and to point out and work on the connections between private troubles and public issues.

4.1.2.4. Activation as disciplinary measure

A third interpretation pattern reflects an understanding of activation as disciplinary measure. As activating labour market policies point on the removal of options for labour market exit and unconditional benefits receipt by the working age population, one dimension of activation work in practice is given also by the functions of control and sanction in a stricter regime of services and benefits. This means that it is part of frontline practice to control that people stick to the rules and to block also the payment of benefits, if necessary. The interesting question in this context is how frontline practitioners interpret and represent this tasks, how they integrate it in their sense-making of what they are doing and how these interpretations differ in relation to different target groups and situations.

Generally, all the interviewed practitioners represent the tasks of control and sanction as rather difficult aspects in their job which they rather try to avoid. In fact, it seems not to be a dimension practitioners identify with in their self-conceptions and refer to in depicting their job. Rather they point out that tasks of control and sanction are a necessary evil of this job which often creates conflicts both on a personal level and in the interaction with service users. Additionally, what is criticised in this context is also a structural conflict which is not grasped in the official representations of the Public Employment Service with its emphasis

on service orientation. Practitioners report that the demanding dimension of activation which includes controls and sanctions remains rather hidden in official representations and that often it's rather ceded to them to be clear what the registration at the AMS is about in terms of rights and duties and what happens if people do not keep the conditions and stick to the rules.

> *"I try everything else before imposing a sanction. (...) But with the goal targets we have, the margins are more restricted than in the past. This means that we have also the time limits. And yes, I inform my clients, I tell them that, if this or that does not work, we can try something else, but if that doesn't work neither, than there are for instance sanctions to expect. (...) It's not fun for me to impose these sanctions. It's really the last thing for me, to show: 'You can go this far, but no further! You are also self-responsible!' Because what some of them do is to relegate their responsibility, telling us: 'You from the AMS are responsible, you have to give us a job!'."*

> *„So that is what we have to do. That's part of our job as advisors at the AMS, to also impose sanctions, when necessary."*

In this context clearly emerges that the interviewed practitioners have to face the typical dilemmas of street-level bureaucrats. On the one hand, they point out their responsibility of public administration and the legal basis which clearly regulates the regime of benefits and sanctions. On the other hand, the findings suggest that beyond the given regulations practitioners still find margins of manoeuvre and can decisively influence the handling of blocking periods and the freezing of benefits. In this sense, from practitioners representations emerges, that also in this regard one has to find his or her own way to deal with this part of the job.

> *"I talk myself out with the law, or I do not talk myself out, yes, it is the law. I can't help, I cannot risk my job for the fact that he doesn't attend his course for the third time and excuse to freeze him. I mean, I see myself as an executing person, I am working according to a legal framework, which I cannot change just because I'd feel like doing it, but I have my fixed requirements. Yes, and it works out quite well, the customers do understand that, that there's really a legal basis and that it's not the single advisor who is arbitrarily good or bad."*

> *"In the past, I've also tried to sanction as little as possible. One colleague next to me, who I trained in two years ago, is still doing it like this. She's looking to avoid every possible sanction, to cop out just because it's unpleasing her. What I can understand. But you simply*

have to find your own recipe for you, so that you can live with it. It's nonetheless part of our function. And she is anyway getting her money for it, that she does it and executes the law. A policeman wouldn't either start to discuss with you whether it makes sense that there is a speed limit of 130 kilometers per hour. What he has to do in this moment is to execute the law and that's what he gets his wonga for. Recently a colleague told me that he hadn't done anything because there was such a poor woman, a lonely mother with two kids. I asked him: 'M., had she been informed what the rules are?', and he: 'Yes, she had been informed.', I said: 'Then she took the money away by herself. Not you!' That's it. I am not going to enhance the self-responsibility, if I indulge everything, if I always bend the rules. That's sure."

What is interesting is how the interviewees differ in their responses in relation to their space of manouvre and their discretional power. At first, some practitioners point out that there are very clear rules defined by law which are also very clear about what constitutes a just cause for not attending an appointment, for instance, and, thus, for the relief of a sanction.

"No, it's a provision given by law. It's defined very clearly. The costumer can see it as he likes, but it's simple, a just cause for not attending an appointment is, very clearly, if I am sick, if I have a job interview, if I have a hearing in a court trial, things I can prove. If I was on care leave, because my child was sick, I can prove that, as well."

However, sooner or later, all of the interviewed practitioners admit that in practice things are never as bad as they seem and that they have decisive margins and power to influence what eventually is carried out. The interesting aspect are practitioners' argumentations in this respect. All the interviewed practitioners emphasise that they sometimes have to take into account if a person is in a difficult situation or what the freezing of benefits means to a person in a given situation. However, there seem to be different strategies to handle these situations and different argumentations in legitimating and accounting for their street-level behaviour. Of course, these strategies and argumentations might change depending on the severity of the situation, on the previous case history and on other aspects which might determine the decision making in a specific moment. Anyway, generally there can be distinguished two main argumentation patterns, on the one hand a more professional one which claims that these kind of discretion is an important feature of doing a good job, which sometimes can simply require to make an exception, to give a second chance and to avoid imposing a sanction, for instance. In this argumentation pattern

the strategies adopted by practitioners seem to be more open and to reflect a more advocacy oriented approach. In this pattern, practitioners emphasize the importance of being very transparent, of documenting very well what happened but at the same time of advocating openly for the interest of the service user. A second argumentation pattern, on the contrast, points more to the level of a personal claim to avoid excessive harm for extremely vulnerable people. In this argumentation pattern strategies are depicted as rather clandestine, as tacitly bending the rules, as turning a blind eye, or as very rare and undocumented exceptions made in extreme situations.

> *"Of course there are statutory provisions, but basically, after all, it's so that every advisor works a bit differently. And that's, essentially, the good in it, because every person, every customer comes from a different background. And if someone, I just had a young man and his father was hit by a stroke. And he was completely drained and dropped out of his course. I would never punish him, additionally, right? Thus, as advisor I have my freedoms. Of course I have to justify and to document it, but really, you have your freedoms."*

> *„Yes, it's insofar possible to bend the rules, as the customer is willing but couldn't manage to do something, or that he hadn't understood or known something. Then we say sometimes: 'Ok, we excuse that now, but for the next time we firmly agree that...' (...) I can always legitimate it. I can always justify it because I say, that everyone deserves a second chance. Very simply. And indeed, I justify it in this way."*

> *„I just can inform them about what is written in the statutory provisions. Anyway, that's again something which is, actually, never as bad as it seems. If then, I, as advisor, can cushion that somehow, I try do that. (...) Well, I don't have to document necessarily, that I hit on it, that, actually, there went something wrong. But I really do that only in case of hardship. Extremely exceptional cases."*

Another very interesting aspect is how frontline practitioners contextualise the dimension of disciplinary action in their job. As already pointed out, practitioners rather identify themselves with the enabling and supporting dimension of activation while the demanding and disciplinary dimension is sometimes rather perceived as a bothersome or even objectionable part of their job. In fact, as has been shown, practitioners sometimes make use of their discretional power and of their spaces of manoeuvre to cushion or to avoid punitive action. However, at the same time practitioners agree on a conception of activation aimed at strengthening people in their self-responsibility and self-initiative. In this context,

also from their representations emerges the orientation pattern of activation as disciplinary action although the emphasis on it differs highly depending on different target groups or on different distinctions made between those who are considered as active and willing and those who are seen as inactive and unwilling.

With respect to the youngest target groups there seems to prevail a softer approach where the dimension of disciplinary action remains rather in the background or is, at least, represented in a softer way, as rather motivational "wagging the finger". In fact, the interviewed practitioners from the special branch office for young people underline that, in comparison to colleagues who work with adult target groups, they are much more permissive and tolerant with the youngsters and they emphasise the importance of a more pedagogical approach which leads them to self-responsibility by and by. In this sense, they emphasize that their approach is less demanding, that they overlook much more and that self-responsibility has first of all to be taught and only afterwards to be demanded. Needless to say, that this softer approach has to be seen against the background of the special characteristics of this target group. Young people often have to be assisted in their very first transition into work and accordingly they are seen as still having to find the right direction or to find or catch up a marketable qualification. Additionally, young people often don't get neither unemployment benefits (as they haven't matured any entitlements yet) nor social assistance (as they are often still living at the expanse of their parents).

> *"Especially with those youngsters who don't get benefits. Or also compared to adult target groups. We are overlooking much more, giving more chances. (...) I mean, sooner or later it must happen here, too. I mean you have to impose a paragraph 10 at a certain point, that's when they do not attend or drop out of their courses, when they don't show any self-initiative at all. That happens here, too. But I really think that we are overlooking much more. But that's necessary, it's a different age. (...) We have our margins. The job offers which are sent through the post, for instance, ok, then it happened that the job offer got lost, unfortunately. Or you can still find something in the job offer which didn't fit well, such as the time schedule, in order to argue that an application was not possible. There are possibilities of bypassing in a way. Yes, and paragraph 10, ok, in our office here, the shit has really to hit the fan that someone imposes a paragraph 10. There must be happened really a lot, we excuse that for a long time."*

> *„They have to learn to be self-responsible. Exactly. And before you haven't led them to be it, you shouldn't neither demand it. So you tell them what they have to bring and try to agree on*

that. And if it doesn't work the first time… That's why I say, I am a bit, I mind that they have learnt it first of all."

The situation seems to be, however, quite different in relation to adult target groups aged over 21 years. The findings suggest that in relation to adults the interpretation of activation as disciplinary action is more pronounced and that the functions of control and sanction are more present in daily frontline practice. As it has been already pointed out, practitioners identify themselves rather with more positive orientation patterns, nonetheless they frankly acknowledge that they also have to exercise public authority and to carry out regulatory functions (even if the AMS itself is presenting itself mainly as a user oriented service provider). In this context, practitioners emphasise the importance of giving very clear information on the rights and duties of service users right from the very beginning.

"For me that's a key moment in the counselling process. That the customer gets well informed. That needs time. That's just how it is. (…) To explain certain things, that simply needs time. And now imagine, that here is sitting someone who doesn't even speak fairly German, not to mention of having a clue about certain laws or what has to be done accordingly"

"I've accustomed myself to address that again and again with the folks. To remind them consistently that they do are not only entitled to get benefits, but that this is even linked with duties. And that's what I think is a pity for us as advisors, that we have so little time. Because it's not that easy to compress that in 10 minutes."

In this respect practitioners underline also the importance of the support agreement which is made with every service user individually and which maintains written record of the aims and steps to be taken as well as of deadlines and reporting requirements. This agreement in form of a written and signed contract between the AMS and the service user is seen as an important element for the service provision relationship and for a clear communication of goals and duties and, hence, also as an important instrument of responsibilisation.

„I always say clear agreements set clear limits. That's very very important. Because it removes a certain uncertainty factor."

„In any case, already during the first appointment everything we agree is written down. That's the so called support agreement which is made for the first 3 months. We write down what has been agreed, the preliminary situation maybe, possible health restrictions, maybe the aspirations for professional orientation or qualification. And, additionally, we also record the reporting requirements, so that they are contained also in the support agreement. That they have to attend their control appointments."

„You have to make clear what they are expected to and what can be discussed. It is a cooperation. I mean, of course it depends also on the background of the advisor, sure, on which job offers I pass them on. Because there are also completely absurd placement proposals. Yes, of course. If the AMS, if they aim for troubles, yes, that's very easy to do."

However, although practitioners emphasise the importance of clear legal instructions, of explaining to service users their rights and duties and of a written support agreement also in order to prevent the need of imposing sanctioning measures, the dimension of exercising disciplinary action is part of their job and they have to face situations in which they have to block services and freeze benefits. Despite the allusions that these are the given rules, practitioners show to take into account the individual situation of service users and the possible effects of sanctions and, thus, to differentiate also in their use of discretion and in their decisions. What is emphasised in this regard is, that it makes a huge difference whether the freezing of benefits implicates troubles in terms of existential living conditions or not.

"If you cancel the money for 6 weeks to a family father it's a tragedy. If you cancel it to a 22 years old one, who gets, don't know, skimpily three Euro per day and who gets paid everything anyway by his parents, it's a huge difference, of course. Because they say: 'What the hell, I don't care!' or 'Ok, my dad has to pay again.' or so. Thus, it's a huge difference, if they are still living with their parents, for them it's a kind of peanuts what they get from the AMS and if they don't get it, my God, maybe they cannot go out for a month. But it's not that tragic, as if I freeze the money to someone who has to pay a rent or so."

„There are also those ones who have their jobs and who are registered here for social insurance reasons mainly. Those people who have built their shadow existences, who have their moonlighting incomes. They accept it to get no money for six or eight weeks. They don't care a lot about this. They also need this time to do their jobs or whatsoever."

Thus, depending on the different situations practitioners experience the function of control and sanction as differently challenging and the findings suggest that practitioners use

their margins of manoeuvre and their different strategies accordingly. It's mainly in relation to situation perceived as less difficult that practitioners stress the educative and corrective function of disciplinary action. But the emphasis given to this orientation patterns clearly differs also depending on different target groups. While for instance practitioners from the special office for young people who are working with the youngest target groups up to 21 years underline their indulgent approach this seems to change clearly in relation to adult target groups aged over 21, who are registered at the territorially organized branch offices all over the city of Vienna. These offices differ in their internal organisation as some of them offer special counters for certain target groups, such as young adults aged between 21 and 25 years. Practitioners who are working only with this target groups of young adults point out that on the one hand it's not so difficult for them to impose sanctions as these young adults do mostly receive very limited benefits and are often still economically supported by their parents. On the other hand it's emphasised that particularly this target group needs to be lead to be self-responsible and the exercise of disciplinary action is seen as a useful means to show them the consequences of their behaviour and the conditionality of getting supporting services and benefits. In this sense, it's pointed out that, if they do not stick to the rules, it's important that they experience the consequences.

> *"For me it's important that they stick to the rules. I'm not the one who makes exceptions. We have certain rules and the young people have to learn to stand to these rules. If they don't do it, they have to expect the consequences. I explain a lot, I talk a lot, I speak about that and repeat it. Then, if it doesn't work, the consequences follow. And I keep with that and I believe that the young people need that."*

> *"In this regard our patience doesn't last that long. Because we say, in the main working age, adult and responsible, insured jobs have to be given priority. Then you place them also in unskilled labour jobs. Also if someone doesn't get benefits. And if someone refuses such a job offer for three times, then the registration is signed off. Actually, we throw them also out, so to say, Yes, it isn't so that you can be registered here eternally."*

Thus, the findings show that in practice activation means often also disciplinary action. In this regard practitioners interpretations are partly conflicting. On the one hand, they identify themselves less with the demanding and controlling dimension of their job and they try to prevent or even avoid the imposing of sanctions and the freezing of benefits, especially in situations of excessive harm. On the other hand, though, they point out the importance of responsibilising service users and the educative and corrective effects of

disciplinary measures. Thus, they share are at least to some extent the orientation pattern of activation as disciplinary action and see disciplinary measures also as an important means in the constitution of a responsible and marketable self. Against the background that practitioners do, on the one hand, dispose of discretional spaces but rely, on the other, on a very individual way of getting along in their job, the interesting question is when the orientation towards disciplinary action comes to the fore. Although practitioners identify themselves first of all with other dimensions of the job and although the official representation of service orientation rather conceals it, activation work means also exercising sovereign functions and hence, control and power to sanction.

> *„None of us is out to have quarrels or discussions and it shouldn't be a power relationship. Of course we are in a position of power. No doubt of that! When it is about the money and when we have to decide if someone is in breach of a paragraph, hasn't done something he should have done, then we are definitely in a position of power. But I think nothing of acting this out."*

The findings suggest that the decisive element which brings the orientation towards disciplinary action to the fore and which is, accordingly, used as justifying rationale, is the distinction between those who are willing and those who are not. Who is seen as trying to be self-responsible and actively keen in his or her endeavours for labour market integration is considered as deserving support and, even if something doesn't work as it should, a more indulgent approach, while disciplinary action is exercised on those who are considered as inactive and not willing to bestir themselves for getting into employment. This creates de facto a situation of suspicion towards service users who are considered as employable but who don't make it. This crucial distinction which in the end has to be made by frontline practitioners, emerges clearly in regard to social assistance recipients. With the introduction of the new means tested minimum income scheme, the registration at the AMS is mandatory for all social assistance recipients considered as capable for work. Although the facto practitioners underline that many people of this target group have multiple limitations for effective employment, social assistance recipients seem at the same time to be most exposed to the general suspicion of preferring to be inactive and to rely on social assistance. Although social assistance is not paid directly by the AMS but by local social welfare offices, AMS frontline practitioners have a crucial role in assessing the willingness and, thus, deservingness of social assistance recipients. If social assistance recipients do not stick to the rules and perform according the given limits this is reported from the AMS to the social

welfare offices which can cut social assistance benefits on the basis of to the reported performance in active labour market integration attempts. The findings suggest that in this context the very old distinction between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" is clearly coming to light and that frontline practitioners are primarily involved in operating this distinction in practice and, thus, in exercising a function of gatekeeping in order to avoid social assistance abuse.

The key role of practitioners in this respect is even more striking against the background of the fact, that they do, on the one hand, dispose of remarkable discretional spaces beyond (or under) the given rules, but are, one the other, heavily individualised in their decision making processes. Even though they underline that they do just report what is going on in practice and that they are not the directly responsible for the cutting of benefits, their distinctions and decisions provide the basis on which these decisions are taken. As has been shown, the way frontline practitioners carry out their job is heavily determined by their very personal interpretations and efforts and the findings suggest that frontline practice lacks of a set of professional criteria for dealing with challenges frontliners have to face. This suggests that the space of mediation between statutory provisions given by formal policy goals and the individual situations of service users is scarcely filtered by a set of professional standards or collective ethical concerns but rather let to the individual advisor as his or her own business. This might be seen as unproblematic as long as frontline practitioners try to give their best and are able to mediate in a somehow acceptable manner between what has to be done and what the interests of service users are. But it shows the precarious situation frontline practitioners themselves are exposed to and how the implementation of activation policies, and, eventually, the relation between the state and its citizens and the concretion of citizenship, are shaped by these personally contingent (and arbitrary?) micro-processes at the frontline of activation services.

To sum up, it can be stated, that the orientation pattern of activation as disciplinary action is present in practice. It cannot be said that practitioners embrace this orientation pattern uncritically. On the contrary, they keep in the background of their self-conceptions and they depict the exercise of disciplinary measures as rather challenging aspects of their job which they try to prevent or avoid by different strategies. However, the orientation pattern of disciplinary measure clearly emerges and is also legitimised by practitioners in relation to those target groups who are perceived as unwilling and inactive. Frontline practitioners seem to have a crucial role in assessing the willingness of people and in operating – against the background of their own set of beliefs – the distinction between

"those who need the carrots and those who need the sticks". This doesn't mean that practitioners are only acting arbitrarily as their set of beliefs do, of course, reflect policy ideas and more generally the normative patterns in society which constitute the basic ideas on how the state as active force in the ordering of social relations has to act upon its citizens. The point is that the dilemmas in the normative framing of activation and the ambiguities of activating labour market policies are broken down to a context of practice which offers limited space for a politically reflexive professionalism and does rather rely on a dimension of interpersonal governance in which both practitioners and service users find themselves, eventually, in precarious situations of personal self-reliance, and, hence, in a situation which is rather concealed than contemplated by the official slogan of individualised service provision.

However, although disciplinary action is part of frontline activation work it must be pointed out, that the interviewed practitioners seem keen not to wrong service users and to be cautious in their assessment of people. Furthermore, although they recognise that their job sometimes means also disciplinary action, they are rather reserved on its effectiveness. In the end, the important dimension and the success of their job seems to be located elsewhere. What makes the difference seems to be in fact what practitioners make out of it and how they deal with the disciplinary authority given to them.

> *"On the other hand I cannot doing wrong to my customers. Because many of them say I cannot do this or that. It does not work to insist that they do it anyway."*

> *„Sometimes you have to exercise pressure, sometimes you have to motivate. But I wouldn't say that most of the people who are registered here wouldn't be willing to work. You can't put it like this."*

> *"In part it's useful, yes. If someone's money is blocked for 6 weeks for instance, that he gets aroused, that he sees: 'Ok, now I'm standing here without money. I have to do something.' But there are the others, who, I wouldn't say that they don't care, outwardly they bear it like this. 'I give a damn on it!' But you don't know what's going on inside them. Thus, for me it's no fun at all, to exercise these sanctions."*

> *"I wouldn't say that you have always to threaten them with that. But somehow you try to make clear that there are not only right, but also duties, here at the AMS. But it often goes also wrong. Often it doesn't matter. Sometimes they really don't care if the money is blocked for 6 weeks. In many cases you don't achieve a lot this way. Let's put it like this. With*

someone it works. But for me it's, I rather think, that maybe it takes time, but essentially it is about establishing confidence."

4.1.2.5. Activation as the administration of the unemployed

Finally, the findings suggest that in some situations practitioners have to deal with, both the more enabling orientation patterns of qualification and motivation as well as a more disciplinary oriented approach of activation clearly reach their limits. This is the case in relation to those target groups who don't have any real chance to be integrated in the labour market. Despite different offers for those who are considered as the furthest from the labour market or transit solutions in non-profit social enterprises, practitioners highlight that there are also the "no hopers", service users who don't have any realistic chance to be brought back in regular employment. As the different stories show, people considered as don't having any chance at all can belong to different target groups. Practitioners refer to young people with heavy addiction problems, to people with problems of mental health, to homeless people or to people with multiple limitations for a real perspective of labour market integration.

"For me, personally, what's most difficult are young people, who have severe mental health problems. Where you have to doubt on their ability to work. Who have attacks of distress or who cannot be amongst people. You cannot send to a course someone who cannot stay in a group. Or who isn't even able to go there taking the underground. Because in the underground there are too much people. And this course of action then, yes, there are many of these assistance facilities or diagnostic assessment centres, where you can make a rehabilitation plan. But then, when you have to say: 'Ok, now I really don't know anymore how to go on. What could I do as a next step? Because this and that and the other didn't work!' And you have to do something with the young man or the young woman. Because you can not simply abandon them. Something has to happen. Beacuse they need support. That's why they are here."

"Then you have a 22 year old one, who is heavily drug addicted, for instance, what can you do? That's the negative thing here, because sometimes you cannot help at all, sometimes you think: 'Gosh, hopefully he will survive his thirties!' Yes, because that's heavy. (...) If someone is really heavily drug addicted, you are challenged as advisor to see how you can let him slip through in a way which is acceptable for everybody. Because which employer takes someone who's on drugs? Where you can see it, because many of them show it, because of these blue lips or because they have to go for their drugs. They haven't any chance at all!"

However, as pointed out by practitioners, even people who don't have any realistic chance on the labour market continue to be registerd at the AMS and as such to be target of activation. Practitioners acknowledge the offer of different supporting measures and low-threshold training programmes even for the furthest from the labour market, but at the same time they are very clear on the fact that some people will continue to be cut out of the labour market although they aren't considered as unable to work, at least officially.

> *"In Austria, there is the possibility, at least till now, that customers can apply for a disability pension[49]. It's a pension that does not depend on full achievement of insurance periods or of retirement age. You must have accumulated a certain social insurance period but then the PVA (Pension Insurance Agency) can test if you are really not able to work anymore. But by now, in order to save money, they are so restrictive that the common practice is to decline all these applications in the first instance. And then we get these customers back and there are so many of them, who can realistically not be placed anywhere. I already had of those customers! I had one customer, for instance, who had been rejected by the PVA and who came here and showed me the expert report from the Labour and Social-Security Court and there was written that he could quasi still carry out the activities of a doorman. I mean, this is really the last thing one can do. There's no lower threshold! For being a doorman, both the physical and the intellectual factors as well as qualifications are not that important. You don't have to be a sportsman, you don't have to have physical strength and you don't have to know anything about cars. Yes, and there was written that he could work as a doorman. But both his cognitive as well as his physical limits don't allow him even to operate a fire extinguisher, for instance. And if you know, that for a doorman job there are very often requested additional qualifications, such as lift attendant or fire protection representative or things like that, then it's problematic. And the Labour and Social-Security Court of course doesn't write in its opinion that there would be a lot of job offers for vacant doorman position to fill. But they simply write that there are enough of doorman positions in Austria without even verifying if these positions are currently available or not. They simply say that there are so many hotels and museums in Austria and all of them need doormen of course!. Whether these places are occupied or not is not verified at all. And then you have… I always call them stiffs, these customers, a bit cynically."*

The findings suggest that in such cases practitioners are aware that activation, eventually, comes to nothing and they try to get service users somehow through without bending too much the rules but at the same time without continuing to push people too hard

[49] Called *Berufsunfähigkeitspension* for employees and *Erwerbsunfähigkeitspension* for the self-employed.

towards something which won't happen. Anyway, practitioners have to keep moving also these service users, and if it's not realistic to keep them moving with the final goal of labour market integration, it still serves the statistics. Practitioners point out that high priority has to be given to prevent that these people pass over in the status of long term-unemployment[50] and, thus, to bring also these people in such courses or trainings which are useful for interrupting the periods which are counted for the calculus of longterm unemployement periods. In this sense, frontliners have also an important function of producing the right statistics, or as two practitioners name it, of bringing together people and statistics instead of people and work.

> *"It's like that, we should, this is also our slogan, bring together people and work. This doesn't happen anymore. It simply doesn't happen anymore."*
> *„We bring together people and statistics."*
> *"We bring together people and statistics. You name it!"*

Thus, even in cases where it is not realistic to bring people into employment practitioners must in some way continue to process them according to the given provisons and procedures. As the findings suggest, practitioners are aware that activation comes to its limits in these cases and that their job is in the end rather an administration of the unemployed who are cut out. At the same time, the offer which can be made to this clients remains strongly focused on the integration in the labour market and references of alternative possibilities of being active or occupied outside from the first labour market are fairly rare if not absent at all. Hence, in these situations activation work risks to be degenerated to a kind of simulation which continues to keep people moving without reaching its aims.

> *"Yes, we continue to do what we have to do. To arrange courses and to continue to inform. Of course there is the possibility that someone recovers. But we are not responsible for that.*

[50] With respect to the concept of long-term unemployment it is distinguished between being long-term unemployed and being long-term unoccupied, two different statuses which are defined as follows:
Langzeitarbeitslose: In Österreich werden Personen, die über 365 Tage arbeitslos gemeldet sind, als langzeitarbeitslos gezählt. Unterbrechungen bis 28 Tage (zum Beispiel durch kurze Schulungen, Krankenstand oder kurze Beschäftigungsepisoden) werden nicht berücksichtigt Langzeitbeschäftigungslose: alle Episoden der Status „arbeitslos", „lehrstellensuchend" und „in Schulung" mit Unterbrechungen von bis zu 62 Tagen werden (unabhängig von ihrer Dauer) zu einem Geschäftsfall zusammengehängt. Als Geschäftsfalldauer werden die Dauern dieser einzelnen Vormerkepisoden innerhalb des Geschäftsfalls addiert (die Unterbrechungen werden bei der Dauer also nicht mitgerechnet). Als Langzeitbeschäftigungslos gilt eine Person wenn sie zum Stichtag eine Geschäftsfalldauer über 365 Tagen hat. (www.ams.at)

We are not doctors and we are not a therapy center or so. I often tell my customers: 'Watch to get fresh air and to do a lot of physical exercises!' But this is nothing curricular or part of a vademecum on how I am expected to do a counselling interview. In part this is quite difficult. In the meantime there are really a lot of clients, where I know quite surely, or at least I do think to know it, that I won't place them anywhere."

Here again, the findings suggest that the context of practice offers limited spaces to deal with these contradictions and limits of activation policies which, eventually, crop out on the frontline of services. Of course this ambiguities cannot just be attributed to the conceptual design of single policies or the system for their implementation, but they are given by the larger dimension of the societal and economic background and the dilemmas the state itself has to face in the exercise of its functions and in the way of intervening through its welfare policies. However, these ambiguities get concrete and show their effects in the moment policies and people as their target groups are brought together and in this sense, it's on the frontline of activation services where the real outcomes of activation policies show themselves also in their qualitative dimension as impact on the real lives of service users. Of course, on the micro-level of practice solutions have to be found for individual situations and practitioners on the frontline of services cannot be expected to solve structural problems. However, the question is if activation work at the frontline of services practice is still conceived as a social arena and as such as a place of mediation between public policy and the sphere of private needs, between given goals, provision and criteria and between what people, also those ones who are not able to perform in terms of (quick) labour market integration, need as (active) citizens. Of course it makes a difference what individual frontline practitioners make out of it, but it makes also a difference if they are in the conditions to make something out of it in the *genius loci* of a political practice intended to respond to social problems, or if they have to make something out of it in the rather secluded dimension of a private response to individualised problems without making the link between private problems and public issues. This problematic aspects emerge of course most prominently with regard to those service users who are seen as having only very limited or even no realistic chances to perform according prior policy goals. At the same time, it could be argued that these situations constitute the acid test for frontline practice as a space for a politically reflexive professional activity. The findings suggest that frontline activation work in the AMS offers a very limited space for such an understanding of practice and that especially in difficult situations practitioners are divided in their activities between their public function (which sometimes risks to degenerate to the administration of no-

hopers) and their private pretence to give, notwithstanding, a response also to those who are cut out from the labour market.

To conclude, it can be said that even though practitioners experience directly the contradictions and limits of activation policies, they share in principle the basic normative ideas of the activation paradigm and the strong focus towards gainful work and quick labour market integration. Thus, they rather put up with difficulties and problems which show the limits of activation policies instead of contextualising them in a broader context and questioning political stratagies on a more abstract level. However, it would be to easy to say that practitioners themselves lack of political awareness but the findings suggest, that it is rather the conception of activation work itself and the conditions under which frontline practice has to be carried out which hinder frontline practitioners in the critical challenging the objectives of their job. In fact, given regulatory provisions and a strong concentration on a quantitative performance output in assessing the accomplishment of frontline work leave very limited space for a critical reflexive practice which would allow practitioners to treat with these issues as integral part of their given mandate. This is reflected also by the different interpretations of the notion of activation which emerege from practitioners representations. The point of reference is given by the individual success in labour market integration and accordingly the given interpreations of what activation work is about differ depending on how promising, how fit and how active target groups are seen in this perspective. In this sense, practitioners represent their job mainly as summoning people in relation to the fulfillment of the given objective of labour market integration, as lasting and as quick as possible. Hence, activation is interpreted sometimes as offering fitting qualifications measures, sometimes as motivating people to pursue the way to employment and sometimes also as exercising disciplinary action to push them in the right direction. Of course, pracitioners seem to be aware of limits and risks, but they are represented as rather private concerns. The job is clearly defined to labour market integration and to the exercise of the functions given by unemployment insurance legislation. What is done beyond (or sometimes rather hidden underneath) the given rules depends mainly on the individual practitioner, on his or her sensitiveness and disposition to accommodate to individual situations and persons. This emerges most pronouncedly in relation to those service users who have the biggest difficulties or no chance at all for labour market integration. In these cases, activation work risks to be narrowed to the administration of the unemployed. What is suggested or done beyond in order to give some additional support or as a means of harm reduction, happens rather outside, as a personal effort and less as a part of the job itself.

However, what practitioners also point out is that what they are doing has, nevertheless, its overall effects, although in practice something might be also questionable.

> *"What you can say, though, I don't want to honour my employer or so now, but we are outstandingly positioned in comparison to many other Labour Market Administrations in Europe. Thus, it might not be that wrong what we are doing. It has some effect, though. While, if you look at it critically and case for case, you could certainly discuss this or that of what we are doing here. But apparently, overall, it has its effects. Otherwise we wouldn't be positioned that well."*

4.1.3. How to be and to behave as a client: the social construction of service users and the practitioner – client relationship

As it has already been indicated earlier, particularly in relation to how orientation patterns vary according to different target groups, the findings show the crucial role of frontline practitioners in assessing service users and in operating distinctions and categorisations for their further processing in practice. This is of course a classical characteristic of the role of street-level bureaucrats. People come to the AMS as individuals, in a specific personal situation of unemployment, from different personal, social, economic and educational backgrounds, with different working and life experiences, with different abilities and skills and, thus, with different perspectives in terms of employability. Of course frontline practitioners have to know who they are face to face with and where to attach an attempt of individual support and to find different resources at disposal. But this crucial moment has to be analysed also in terms of a process of social construction. It's through this encounter with frontline practitioners that people are transformed into service users, or customers as they are usually called in the AMS context. Recognising this crucial moment as a process of social construction means to conceive client characteristics not (or at least not only) as given objective entities existing outside and independently from this encounter, but rather as results constructed within this process and on the basis of the criteria which shape this process. In other words, it's not just about who and how people are, but also about how people are seen and, indeed, made by those who look at them and in relation to the ideas which underpin both political strategies and practical procedures of activation work.

The findings suggest that in their view on service users, practitioners share a strong orientation towards a social investment approach. This emerges most prominently in relation

to young people as target groups. Young people are, on the one hand, often still in their first attempts of labour market integration and generally particularly exposed to the risk of unemployment as it is clearly shown also by statistical figures.[51] Furthermore, practitioners themselves underline that many of the young people are far from being job ready in an increasingly demanding labour market and that they very often have to get a grip on different other aspects before they can be brought into training or employment. However, the general perspective adopted in looking at young people is distinguished by an optimistic and supportive approach and practitioners emphasise that young people are a special target group both in terms of political interest and – in connection with that – as the most promising group to make investments pay off in the future.

> *"For me it's the most fun to work with young people, because there you can still do something. Actually, a lot of them untie the knot and want to absolutely do something and if you can help thereby, it's smashing."*

> *„In the past we offered also career guidance at school, the colleagues from the office for young people did it. But unfortunately it was cut back. And the teachers and educators at school are not prepared for that. They haven't been trained for that. Here again I have to refer to X, because my grandson is now going to the new secondary school. You know that new school model? (...) And there has been introduced this new focal point, starting from the second class, where they speak about jobs and careers. (...) I know that just because my daughter in law came to me quite unsettled saying: 'Imagine, they are doing that starting from the second class! What do you think about that?' and I say: 'That's fabulous!' 'But our little Kevin…' And I say: 'He isn't little anymore, he has already 11 years!' The earlier the better. I think this is a good approach. You have to start there."*

> *„You have rather to motivate them (young people U.N.) to really conclude education or training. Independently which one it is. That can be explained to them plausibly looking at the figures. All of them say, that two thirds of those who have ever concluded a vocational trainig aren't working in this job anymore twenty years later. Thus, it's important for them to have some kind of qualification, because this is always required. Wheter they want to do something else afterwards is a secondary question. (...) For those under 25 it's not that problematic to finance the courses, I'd say. For older target groups that's much more*

[51] In 2013 the average youth unemployment rate (population aged < 25) in the EU (28) was 23.5%. In Italy it was 40,0% in 2013 while in Austria it was 8,7% in 2012 (2013 data for Austria non available in Eurostat) (EUROSTAT).

difficult. But the target group under 25 is one of the main target groups in the AMS. Usually, there's quite some money available for them, if they want to do something."

This is not to say, that a special attention towards young people wouldn't be needed and that special measures for young people shouldn't been given high proprity in labour market policy. The point here is, that it is also the adopted perspective to "construct" the service user. Although practitioners emphasise that they try to take into account the individual situations and to be responsive to the single persons, the findings suggest that as street-level practitioners with very little time at disposal, they have to think also in categories and to assesss service users problems as tracers for possible procedures and categories of action. Thus, this process of transforming an individual person into a service user is connected with the way the context and process of service provision is structured, how benefits and sanctions are, eventually distributed, and how service users are expected to behave as such. In this sense, and the findings do indeed suggest it very clearly, it makes a difference whether a service user is associated to a more promising target group worth to invest in or of a more problematic or suspicious one. These differences might consist not only in the way service users are "seen", but also in the way they are constructed and treated as well as in relation to what they are expected to. This is not to say that practitioners do not take into account enough the individual person or that they let themselves be led by stereotypes. With the heavy case loads and the limited time resources, practitioners are exposed to the classical conditions of street level bureaucracies and their job involves the built-in contradiction to be, one the one hand, responsive and to accordingly exercise discretion in relation to individual situations while, on the other hand, they have to process people in terms of strict time schedules and given procedures. In this sense, the "making" of the client and his or her association to certain categories of services users which are again linked to certain interpretations and strategies of what has to be done, might be part of a necessary client processing mentality street-level practitioners have to adopt if they want to persist in their jobs. However, the question is, here again, wherein the criteria and reference points for this processes of social construction consist and on the basis of which strategies of assessment and screening client processing is operated. As it emerges from the findings, the social construction of clients in activation work is clearly determined by the ultimate goal of having individual success in labour market integration and by the chance that the investments in terms of services and benefits might pay off accordingly. In this sense, the findings suggest that frontline practitioners do see and indeed construct and process service users in relation to their potential performance in labour market integration, i.e. according to

how fit, how promising, how active and how willing service users are to get into employment. It could be argued that this is rather obvious as the job is simply about bringing people into employment. Of course that's what practitioners have to look at in their job. However, the Public Employment Service is not just a private assessment center or placement service. As it has been shown, the activation paradigm as normative framework for welfare state intervention makes a stronger nexus between work and welfare and as such also between people's behaviour and performance in what they are expected to do for their effective labour market integration and their social rights as citizens. Against this background turns out clearly, that the significance of the social construction of clients in activation services goes beyond a private affair of accurate assessment and service delivery for effective job placement. In the end, the way how frontline practitioners construct clients determines also the way they are seen as citizens by the state itself. In this light emerges the political content of these micro-practices on the frontline of activation services and of the distinctions and categorisations operated by frontline staff. In these sense, it's not only about knowing how to technically process different categories of service users but it's about how to activate citizens and, thus, how to shape the concretion of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

> *„Yes, then it depends on the reaction. If he gives me the impression that he really wants to do seomething or not. Because some of them are living that pretty much out, that they, actually, do not have any interest at all. And others seem very willing and exerted. And that's also the question then. Are they, actually, doing it or not? That's the interesting point for me, regardless from the fact that it's a youngster or an adult. How do customers represent themselves. And what is, then, the reality?"*

The findings suggest, that the picture assessed as reality by frontline practitioners is decisive not only for their own interpretations of the notion of activation (as it has already been pointed out), but in the end also for how the relationship between the state and its citizens is represented in practice. Thus, the social constructions of the client at the frontline of services must be conceived also as constructions of citizens and as such as the basis of how to summon the active citizen in practice.

Against this background turns out that the categorisation of clients by frontliners goes beyond a mere technical assessment and division for their smoother processing in the procedural and organisational framework. Assessing people in the Public Employmet Service means also to assess and indeed to construct clients in reference to the ideal of the

active citizen which, eventually, means being in employment and capable to provide for the own (and the own family's) social security and welfare through labour market participation. Furthermore, the processes of assessment and categorisation are a crucial part of the opening up the sphere of the personal for public intervention, or to express in more critical terms, for the government of people through subtle subjectification strategies and individualisation techniques. Looking at this processes through a critical lens does not mean to deny that these processes are simply needed for the implementation of policies and for getting the job somehow done in practice, but it helps to grasp the importance of these micro-processes in frontline work also in terms of how the state operates through these practices. As the findings suggest, the ideal of the active citizen is indeed an important reference point in the representations practitioners give of their clients. Accordingly, the demonstration of willingness becomes an important criterion for their categorisation and also in respect to the target setting practitioners have to respond to. What is striking, however, is that the non correspondence to this normative idea of the active citizen is frequently connected with cultural explanations of unemployment and labour market exclusion suggesting that structural explanations and questions of necessary preconditions for active cizitenship remain rather in the background, at least when it comes to the representations of clients and their categorisations.

> *„I often say that it's since childhood, of course. It comes from their background, very clearly. Most of them for sure come from families where both the mother and the father have always had these 40 cards (were living on social assistance U.N.). And also the dream of the child is, of course, never to work and to be registered at the social welfare office eternally. We have these ones, too."*

> *"What I am saying now, I really say that in a non-judging way. If I spoke with my colleagues they would know what I mean. Those classic clichés, you know, the Turkish mother or so, who is in Austria for 30 years for instance, but has never worked. I'm really saying that neutrally. She applies for social assistance and suddenly she is registered here. There are a lot of these people. Or mothers with child care duties and so on. They are a difficult clientele, too. Difficult because they haven't worked for a long time, obviously, if at all."*

> *"It cannot be our job to assume an educational role for something that has been neglected for 20 or 25 years. We really come to our limits there. Much as we'd like to do that, that's not possible. (...) We have some of those we register for trainings 7 or 8 times. They first tell us that they would really like to do that, but then, the first day they are away sick. They often*

know all these tricks very well. Like eternally trying to duck out of what is unpleasant, or simply not doing it at all. That's what makes the advisors livid with rage, sometimes. Of course, because frontline practitioners are held responsible for reaching the goals. Of course they are going to breach the given time, the 6 months. And the advisor can't do anything. And you can encourage and blandish them as much as you want, for hours. Often it's of no avail. That's very challenging sometimes."

What is hint at in these representations, is that within these processes of service user differentiation and categorisation might come together different dynamics at stake in matters of the allocation of responsibility. Identifying people as culturaly predispositioned, as inactive, unwilling or preferring to live on benefits means to locate responsibility on the individual level. It might be that there are also service users who are indeed inactive and unwilling and who do prefer to live on benefits, but the unilateral attribution of responsibility for unemployment only on the individual level is highly problematic as it fades out the context of the existing labour market, of structural problems and, in the end, also of effects of active labour market policy itself. At the same time, the strategy of locating the responsibility on the individual might also work as a psychological coping strategy that somehow absolves frontline practitioners from service failures or simply from the impossibility of bringing people into employment. The findings suggest that practitioners are generally rather cautious in their descriptions of service users and they underline that they are keen not to do them wrong. However, the risk of blaming the victim also as a coping strategy of practitioners has to be mentioned in this context. As frontline practitioners themselves are exposed to a precarious forms of self-reliance and to performance pressures in this highly contradictory field the risk of blaming the victim might not be completely irrelevant also in practitioners' representations and as such, at least be hinted at here.

Another important aspect in the social construction of clients consists in putting across to service users how they are expected to behave as clients and what they can on their part expect in terms of service provision. Of course getting proper information must be acknowledged as a fundamental right of service users and as a basic principle for the establishment of the practitioner-client relationship and interaction. As a matter of fact, all interviewed practitioners underline the importance of providing proper, exhaustive and precise information to service users even though in most of the interviews turns out that the time available for information is generally very short or inadequate.

"And that's what I think is a pity for us as advisors, that we have so little time. Because it's not that easy to compress that in 10 minutes."

„Information needs time. And there we have a problem again. To really inform a client unhurriedly about what we have to do and what the duties and the rights of clients are. And at the same time we shall be service oriented, customerfriendly. That's always… Sometimes that's quite a balancing act we should carry out. Very often we even can't bring that. (…) If the client says, that he simply didn't know or wasn't clear at all about certain legal consequences, that he hasn't be sufficiently informed, I can absolutely imagine that this can happen, yes. (…) Thus, for me it's an absolute key moment, that you inform clients very well. And this needs time. That's just the way it is. Like when I'm speaking with you now. And you study these things and have a clue on these issues. And now imagine that there is sitting someone who maybe doesn't even speak German properly, not to mention of having any clue about the law or what to do!"

"It's the responsibility of the advisors, to also adequately inform clients. This is time consuming and costs energy. But it often avoids problems in the future. (…) Another thing is, if you have doubts on whether you have informed them properly. But then I'm man enough to stand in for that and to say: 'It's my fault. I really haven't informed them, or I informed them badly or wrong or whatsoever.'"

"The clearer I am, the easier it is. If he (the client U.N.) says: 'Maybe we could..?' ,No way!' Then you have probably 3 minutes of troubles and then he sits down and it's ok, no way. But if I say: 'Well, maybe, let's see and so..' (...) I mustn't say: 'Maybe and perhaps and see saw..' Either it goes or it doesn't!"

However, providing information goes beyond an uncommitted informing about procedures and service functionings. Rather it has to be seen also as part of the more complex process of social construction of the client and as such as intrinsically intervowen with the political ideas and governmental strategies which underpin policies as well as with their acceptance and interpretation by the practitioners responsible for their street level implementation. This is even more important in this context as activation policies do explicitly point on citizens' attitudes and behaviour in relation to their employability and labour market integration. Against this background, the providing (and often also prioritising or selecting) of information by frontline practitioners is an important aspect and actually part of activation work itself. As the findings show information is indeed seen as crucial in practitioners representations of their job. As it is frequently pointed out information

prominently concerns the rights and duties of clients or – as some practitioners emphasise - often even more the duties, as clients are frequently depicted as generally very well informed about their rights but tending to "forget their duties".

> *„They know quite well about their rights. Probably about their duties, too, but they always neglect them a bit. You have to specially call their attention to them. That it is a matter of give and take. (…) When they are already older, then they are normally already familiar with the process. Duties and rights and so, that's actually no big issue anymore. They know exactly that if they don't obey something, then there will be probably some consequences. They already know the game. And with the younger ones, yes, with them you have to develop this."*

> *"In my opinion, the first appointment is one of the most important ones, because there they get firstly informed about their rights and duties."*

> *„Yes, during the first appointment the young people get informed about their duties and rights. They are told how we work and what we expect from them, of course, we have to do that. We agree upon their own initiative, that they have to participate actively."*

But as it sometimes turns out, practitioners do also exercise discretion by providing information selectively. In this way they can alert their clients about different possibilities under the given structure and give them hints on how to bypass certain difficulties or how to work the system. By doing so, practitioners can favour clients without violating (too much) the rules and without taking explicitly decisions in favour of some clients over other ones. Needless to say that the selective use of information given in teaching how to move as clients can substantially advantage those ones who are able to enjoy more or special information.

> *„But of course I say to my youngsters: 'Listen, if you want to abandon this BOKU course because it is that awful and horrible, ok, then do it. Come back here and we'll talk about it!' That's, yeah… I do not even know if I are allowed to do that. I simply do it. I believe that's how we create the conditions within which we can move. (….) It's simply through speaking that people come together. And I try to agree that with my youngsters. Then the appointment gets missed. And you register again in 29 or 30 days. Then you have a new status. And this way you can still bypass certain regulations."*

"'What am I going to sign here, what's written here, what do I tick?' You have to explain that to the people. In part, they understand it and then they look at it. Otherwise they say: 'No no, I don't give a damn about it, I trust you!' And I: 'No, you mustn't trust me! I can make a mistake, too! And you can't know whether I want to do you bad or good. You have to look at it by your own because you are going to sign it and then it's your duty!' That goes in here and out there! That's difficult. Normally you also give them the service contract and they read it. But here again it's a question of time. Do you present and explain it? ‚Here's written this and that and we are going to do this and that. And you have to stick to this and that. This and that, the consequences are these ones. That's written here.' You have to do that. You can't simply say to your clients, to the young people: 'Here's your service agreement. There's written everything we've agreed.' 'I haven't read it. Oh, I forgot that. I didn't know that.' These are the answers you get, otherwise. But if you go really through it and make clear that this is what they have to stick on, then it is a contract. Otherwise it's just a piece of paper I put in my pocket and I'll chuck away at the next rubbish bin."

As is emphasized in the interviews, information given by frontline practitioners alludes also to what happens if clients do not stick to the rules or fail to display proper deference. Certainly, as practitioners point out, informing about possible sanctions in round terms and being very clear and strict on these issues does help clients to know from the very first which are the rules and how to behave accordingly. However, through a more critical lens it's hard not to connect these issues to the governmental strategies of power and subjectivity intended to tie given rules to technologies of the self. Of course, it could be argued, that this is how governing people works and that the showing of sticks and carrots is a necessary "part of the game" in activation work. Anyway, this perspective shows the power and the different possibilities frontline practitioners do have by the ways they inform clients about their rights and duties and about how they call for proper behaviour and define what clients are expected, too.

"That's what really everyone does, to say explicitly: 'You, have you read this! This and that are the consequences if you don't show up there without any valid excuse. Then you probably will lose your money for 6 or 8 weeks. You have to stick to that now. We've documented it, it's written here, you have signed it and, look, I'm going to sign it here.' That's just how it is. And then they understand it."

"I'm not the one who makes exceptions. We have certain rules and the young people have to adhere to them. If they don't they have to face the consequences. I explain a lot, I inform, I

talk, I repeat. And if it doesn't work anyway, then the consequences will follow. And I myself follow that and I think that the young people do definitely need that."

But frontline practitioners do not only have an important role to inform clients about what they are expected to, but they also convey to clients what should be their proper level of expectations of services. They have to tell people what being reistered at the AMS means, what the can get in terms of benefits and services and what can be done for them.

„'And if you don't find nothing suitable where you earn the same money like before, then look for something else, where you get less. But you can't continue to sponge off public money!'. That's problematic. These are reasonable occupations. And I say that to the client very clearly. 'It doesn't harm your health, it's not against moral customs and it's paid according to a collective agreement, too.' It hasn't to be paid according his former collective agreement. And he says: 'But sorry, I've studied this and that and all that jazz.' Then I say: 'Yes, but we don't have to place you in this sector. I can place you also as a cleaner. I can do that, legally.' If I really do that then, is another question again."

As the findings suggest, the ways frontline practitioners give this kind of information and teach how to be a client differ in relation to target groups, to their performance and willingness but also depending on which understanding and interpretations of activation policies practitioners are geared to in their sense-making of what they are doing in daily frontline practice. In fact, although practitioners do rarely frame the representations of their role explicitly in political and critical terms, all of them emphasize the importance of how they approach to clients and shape the encounter with them, even though their representations use rather pedagogical terms or frame it as issues of personality. However, a more critical view on these issues is not intended to criticize or to blame frontline workers, but is, on the contrary, helpful to point out the important role of street-level practitioners which gains particular significance under the conditions of the activation paradigm with its more individualised approach to citizens by the state. In this sense, this perspective helps to understand how the state works, eventually, through local practices and situated agency shaped by local actors and the web of beliefs they are embedded in. However, this dimension seems to be of rather scant attention in the discussions about the professionalisation of activation work, which continue mostly to frame it as an administrative activity with little attention to issues in terms of professional challenges, standards and values. This is even more problematic as the interaction between frontline practitioners and clients is highly determining also the psychological implications that result from the involvement with the

public employment and welfare bureaucracy and accompany the status of being a client. The greater the involvement with institutions and their employees and the more individualised, contingent and conditional the provision of services, the more the self-images of clients might be affected by the signals frontline practitioners emanate towards them and by the ways they make use of their status, power and information. In this sense, the meaning of categorisations operated by practitioners goes beyond a functional differentiation for a smoother processing in the bureaucratic routine, but has to be understood also as labels which are psychologically meaningful to clients and as such also meaningful for their ability of activation. As practitioners themselves continue to emphasize, it can make a huge difference to clients who they get as advisor and how they are treated by him or her. The psychological benefits and the self-image clients develop might be highly depending on whether practitioners are perceived as sympathetic, encouraging and giving signals of positive reinforcement or whether they are seen firstly as controlling, disciplining and being suspicious about clients willing- and deservingness. As has already been shown, the difficulties of labels ascribed by practitioners is also given by the fact that the respective basis of judgement highly depends on practitioners discretion as well as on their interpretations and on their attitudes which in turn depend on many indeterminate and personal factors. This dimension of frontline practice is not necessarily problematic per se, on the contrary, it is, as it has been showed, essential for finding real world solutions in the implementation of policies (and as such not to be abolished by bureaucratic control). The important question is how this spaces of discretion are mediated and which normative reference points constitute the basis of judgement operated by practitioners. What is rather problematic in this context is, that although the micro-processes of practitioner-client interactions in frontline practice are clearly relevant for policy outcomes, these critical aspects are hardly contemplated both in the official job descriptions of frontline activation work and in many debates on its professionalisation. In this sense, while the practitioner-client interaction gains in importance in the activation paradigm with its individualised model of service provision, critical aspects and professional challenges remain rather underexposed, creating a vacuum of professional debate which hints at the reproduction of processes of individualisation and personalisation in activation work also in relation to frontline practitioners. This interpretation impressively emerges also from practitioners representations of their job and their self-conceptions. As has been pointed out, the orientation towards help and support and the importance of a helping relationship are prevalently presented as a rather personal concern and associated to a private claim of

finding a personally acceptable way to get along in this job rather than as a dimension which is contemplated within the given mandate and as integral part of a reflexive practice. In these sense, it can be argued that also the construction of clients and the practitioner-client relationship are highly determined by the personal efforts, attitudes and interpretations of frontline practitioners and that it strongly depends from them as persons how they position themselves in the difficult tension between advocacy and alienation in street-level work. Following the street-level bureaucracy approach, it has been pointed out, how delivering policies through frontline work in bureaucratic systems means to necessarily embrace the contradiction between service delivery by human interaction on the one hand and the conditions and constraints of a bureaucracy on the other. Of course this contradiction is reflected also by the conceptions of the role and the commitment frontline practitioners should adopt in their interaction with clients. On the one hand, they are expected to be responsive and to use their position, knowledge and skills in the best interest of the clients and in order to secure their rights and best treatment. In this sense frontline practitioners are expected to be more than passive gatekeepers and to actively advocate for their clients. On the other hand, the structural dilemmas of street-level work and the structural constraints of the practitioner-client relationship are often at odds and undermine a helping orientation. Thus, advocacy in street-level work is often incompatible with practitioners' tasks to judge and to control clients. As the findings impressively suggest, the encounter of this tension and the need to deal with the resulting dilemmas constitutes the daily bread of frontline practitioners in activation services. These challenges are even more pronounced as activation work is as to some aspects also highly alienated work. Frontline practitioners in activation services do not only have to face the most typical conditions of street-level bureaucracies, such as bureaucratic procedures, heavy case loads and the lack of resources and information. Furthermore, they often are concerned only with a small segment of what people's needs are and, as the findings show, they often have to prioritize problems and procedures which are in fact not the immediate priorities to the people themselves or simply not realistic short term goals, as it is the case, e.g., for people who are described as not realistically placeable on the labour market. In this sense, activation work often risks also to be inauthentic and frontline practitioners have to devote energies in generating appearances of responsiveness and in aspiring to something which probably won't happen. Moreover, as some advisors have pointed out clearly, they are often even involved only into small segments of the process towards labour market integration. Advisors normally have minimal time to see their clients, and they have to fall back upon external services even though they often have the feeling that

they could do and achieve more with some more time at disposal for direct client work. Another aspect which might also contribute to alienation in activation work is the fact, that labour market integration is not only a question of the individual employability and the efforts for its improvement, but it eventually depends also (and maybe even much more) on a variety of external factors and structural conditions, which lie outside the influence of active labour market policies at all. In this sense, the ultimate outcome of activation work can hardly be controlled and advisors (as well as clients) have to face the constant uncertainty whether their performance of what they think is a good job will result in the desired outcome of labour market integration. Thus, activation work is characterised by a variety of factors which increase the risk that frontline practitioners might become alienated in their work and from their clients. This could mean that they become also more willing to accept organisational restructuring and less concerned with their relationship with clients and with protecting clients' interests and advocating for clients' rights. As the findings from the interviews suggest, these risks are not to be underestimated. Although the interviewed practitioners point out the importance of how they interact with clients and their orientation towards support and a helping relationship, the conception and the conditions of frontline practice in the AMS seem not to be very conducive to integrate the dimensions of advocacy and support in what is seen as the real mandate of the advisors' job. Rather these dimensions remain in the sphere of a private and personal concern of the single practitioner while practitioners themselves have to cope with the often alienating conditions of their job.

4.2. Frontline work in the AFOL (*Agenzia per la formazione, l'orientamento e il lavoro*) context in Milan

4.2.1. Providing orientation and support as a professional activity: Practitioners' self-conceptions

As has been already pointed out, one important dimension addressed in the interviews with frontline practitioners concerns their self-conceptions and their representations and interpretations of what they are doing in practice. Of course, the role of frontline practitioners is defined by job descriptions and in the operationalisation of their institutional mandate. However, when practitioners are asked about their job and how they would describe it, they go beyond its formal descriptions and point out what is important to them in their very own interpretations of the given role and what they are geared to in carrying out this job in street-level practice. These representations and interpretations provide information on practitioners' self-conceptions and on their sense making in practice. They also give interesting hints on the context within practitioners have to move, on challenges and dilemmas they encounter as well as on ways they try to face them in daily frontline practice. Both in the theoretical and empirical approach of this work, this dimension plays a crucial role as it is considered an important element of the policy implementation process which shapes and, indeed, makes policy on the ground and in direct contact with service users.

Looking at practitioners' interpretations of their role and mandate, the findings suggest also for the Milan case a strong user orientation and a strong emphasis on the helping relationship. But in this regard it has to be taken into account that the interviewed practitioners in the AFOL context do predominantly concentrate on occupational orientation and career advisory services without assuming the tasks of the classical employment service bureaucracy - such as registration of the unemployed, the bureaucratic control of entitlements, the administration of benefits and the execution of sanctions - which are hardly linked with enabling measures of job search assistance and carried out by administrative staff. This is even more the case for the interviewed practitioners in the orientation and career advisory services (*Polo Orientamento and Job Caffè*).

> *"We do not enter in their bureaucratic affairs, we're not interested in them. Our job is to work with the person, on the level of competences, on what are you, what are your needs in this regard, and as I've said before, what are you lacking for for getting a job? But then, we*

don't even know if they get unemployment benefits or not, it doesn't matter to us. (…) Maybe it is asked during the assessment, but it is not relevant for our work. (…) (T)he Employment Centre registers the clients, but for mere administrative purposes, to attest the status of unemployment. We are a matter apart."

The situation is a bit different in the Employment Centre, where the interviewed practitioners had experiences also within the employment service bureaucracy, but even within the employment service there seems to be little contact and integration between the bureaucratic tasks and service provision, even though the employment centre is changing and tries to develop better services for both citizens and employers.

"Yes, let's say that during the last years the prejudice of the Public Empoyment Service as being only a placement agency has been a bit dispelled. It can offer also other services. (…) Thus, working on this, we made some progress, years ago, when we started with these active policies, it was difficult to get the message across, that the Public Employment Service offers more, that it isn't anymore the old placement agency where you go to stamp your card. Infact, someone still comes with the old booklet (libretto del lavoro) thinking that we'd still have to put the stamp in it, things that have been changed and all the rest. Thus, also active policies have helped to dispel this existing kind of prejudice which is still there, less among young people, but among there parents it is still there, for sure."

Anyway, as the interviewed practitioners at the employment service are working mainly with younger target groups, their clients most of the times don't get any benefits.

"It can happen, it can happen that maybe people who present themselves for the declaration of willingness to work which then serves for the INPS (social insurance) registration and to activate the whole process of benefit receipt, it can happen that they fall within our target and so they are informed about the project, if they are interested in it. It happened to have several people in the programme who got benefits because they had just finished an occupation, but were full target of our project and so they took advantage of this offer. But usually we do not have projects that necessarily combine active policies with passive policies."

This structural difference both in the conception and in the organisation of activation services is very important as it means that in practice there is little integration not only between so called active and passive measures but also between the demanding and the enabling side of activation. Accordingly, the representations of the interviewed practitioners

suggest that frontline practitioners in Milan are less faced with contradictions and dilemmas of activation work than their colleagues in the Viennese case. Against this background of little exposure to the dilemmas of activation, it is not surprising that practitioners' representations and interpretations of their job seem to be less conflicting and much more in line with the given institutional mandate, which is, actually, not defined as ending unemployment as soon as possible (as it is much more the case in the Viennese AMS) but as orienting and supporting people in their job-seeking and labour market integration process. In this sense, the strong orientation towards a helping relationship expressed by frontline practitioners and their claim to effectively respond to service users' needs is not perceived as being at odds or as incompatible with what the "real" mandate of the job is. Accordingly, the claim to help and to support people, to understand and to respond to individual situations is not framed as a rather personal concern or as a private claim to do the job in a personally acceptable way, but is represented as being at the heart of what the job as such is actually about, with all the difficulties and gratifications of a professional activity based on a helping relationship.

> *"Let's say that our job should actually be considered delicate work because after all we are working with people and beyond some technalities and sheets, at the basis of our work there is a lot of a helping relationship, and this fact should require particular attention."*

> *"For doing job orientation and career guidance you definitely need a lot of empathy, listening skills, patience. Let's say that these are the qualities a good advisor has to be endowed with."*

> *"The easy cases are solved quickly, thus, definitely a helping relationship, but with many difficult moments because who has employment difficulties has actually to carry on also other difficult personal experiences. Thus, you have to go in depth anyway and to work also for a long time with those who agree to go this way, as I've said before, and thus accept the agreement and follow a project of more specialised guidance with us. But of course there are many difficult moments, many obstacles. It's not an easy job, it is hard work, so even when we get home, when I get home sometimes I want to be silent and not to talk to anyone, however, because listening all day long is not easy at all. (...) It is not a job that everyone can do, but like all jobs, no? Each of us has his or her own characteristics and qualities, so definitely if you aren't empathetic, if you don't have patience, you don't have the ability to get down and listen to the other person, maybe you should make another job, right?"*

The issues of giving help and support and the dimension of the interpersonal and helping relationship are also at the forefront of the descriptions and representations of the job practitioners would give to an outsider who has no clear ideas what their job is about. Understanding the needs of the individual person and giving orientation and support in an individualised project on the way towards employment, these are the important aspects in how practitioners describe what they are doing in practice.

> *"I am career guidance and job counsellor and when I see this question in the eyes: 'What's that? Now I know as much as before…', I explain that my and my colleagues' job is to facilitate the job search for those who lost their jobs or who are looking for another one in order to improve their opportunities."*

> *"What I do? It's job guidance and counselling, I support people in their professional choices and job search activities, thus, the improvement of their job serach instruments, support both in their choices and their search strategies, that's it. The competences you need? Listening skills, definitely, I'd say, active listening, empathic listening (…), the capability to also analyse the problems, to effectively grasp a persons' needs, but also good displaying capabilities, to be very clear, because you have to give information and to give it in a way it gets accessible and usuful for the others."*

At the same time all the interviewed practitioners do clearly refer to this dimension when they speak about what they like of their job and in what they find gratification.

> *"It's a job that appassionates me a lot, because it's anyway based on a helping relationship, being able to support who is in difficulties, both in regard to employment or training, and having then maybe some positive accounts, which are difficult to have, but when you get them it's motivating, sure!"*

> *"I am very sure about this, what I like really a lot in this job is the relationship or making the others tell me what they are doing, what it means to do a certain job, (…). And then, then I like a lot, to, well… to help people elaborate a professional project and to see that through the exchange, the chatting, the interview very often the fog starts to lift and they start spotting a possible way, a thing you can barely do by your own. (…) I definitely like it to be a facilitator of choices, as someone defines this job."*

> *"The relationship with people. For me spaeking with people every day… The satisfaction when the person gets your point, as I've said before, the message you want to give and this,*

yes, because I couldn't even say helping people, because in the end you don't know whether you can help them, you don't know it. But, actually, to give them a useful message and to make them a bit more autonomous. (...) First of all because the common goal is to satisfy the person in a way and to make her or him more autonomous. (...) Our work is actually made by the relationship with people, thus they come at the first place, for all of us. And then there is also this personal aspect, my own, to interact with people. I could never work in an office, alone, in the back office, thus, this is very important to me, it satisfies me a lot. The biggest satisfaction I get from the person I am talking to."

"And, thus, it also gratifies myself, to see that my job is useful in the life of an unemployed person, that it helps. Thus, that's the aspect I like in my job, being at disposal to whom is in difficulties, in employment difficulties in this case. This, actually."

"Today I can say that it has been the right choice, I've always worked in the field of permament education and training. But I graduated in Economics, the lucrative aim, the profit everywhere, you know, in all my documents, it had been alwys about the earnings, the earnings, the profit, the profit. But seeing to be useful to someone who does not even pay for this service and giving a concrete practical answer then, this gratifies me. Going home with this fulfillment, this satisfaction is the best thing you can get from a job, regardless of all the possible problems. Thus, when they ask me: 'What's your job?', it's a bit difficult to explain, very difficult because you cannot convey the sense of it, unless to an insider, but it doesn't matter, though. What is important is to feel yourself satisfied, and as eight hours a day is a lot of your day time to spend in a place, I'd say that this is a more than plausible motivation."

"(...) because I wanted to give a concrete contribution for those, who could have been, I don't know, in need."

At the same time practitioners do also refer to the dimension of giving help and support when they speak about what success means to them in their job. Success is mainly depicted as having an impact on the persons, as encouraging them, as raising their awareness about their possibilities on the labour market and as enabling them in their job search efforts by providing them knowhow and better focused strategies. Of course, the ultimate goal remains the taking up of a job, but as some practitioners point out, the success of orientation, job search assistance and counselling cannot be identified only in an eventual job placement. They rather frame success with a strong focus on the individual person with his or her attitudes, behavior and skills.

"I'd say that I see the success with the people who after a longer process, I'd say after two, three meetings start to acquire a better self-awareness, and a better sense of what the reality on the labour market is, because… I'd say a lot of people don't have this awareness. There are a lot of disoriented people, but they don't know it, let's say that they don't even want to put themselves into question, they don't want to orient themselves, to use more instruments, more resources and to apply more efforts and energies in finding a job. Thus, if I notice that a person after two, three meeting acquires this awareness, I see that as a case of success. Thus, certainly not the job placement, no, because data on this are missing, unfortunately. Thus, or we keep in touch with the person, then we know it, otherwise this information gets lost. Thus, I'd put it this way."

"For sure, when you see a person who not only goes away happy (…) but who has effectively a more structured path to follow, a better defined project. And perhaps then, after a while, as it happened sometimes, this person arises again, calls you, and says: 'Look, I did this, this and that, and indeed, it went well!' There are those who arrive with chocolates, I don't know how to say , those who conclude. Many times, however, the success of our work, yes, is seen in the final employment. But it shouldn't be like this. A perfectly oriented person could also be an unemployed person in the sense that orientation has not necessarily an output in terms of getting a job. But if this person is happy and satisfied and could, maybe, also find a job thanks to your advice, well, you feel useful. Thus, I feel, for me a successful case is a case of helpfulness, when I feel useful to someone. Success for me is when the user thanks me. It happened, for instance, that the user dropped by to thank me bringing chocolates. I do not care of those chocolates! They remain there for everyone, but the fact that I see that I've been able to give something to the person. Sometimes even little things, a bit of courage."

"Well, the most concrete success is when a person gets a job. If he or she writes an e-mail or calls me and says: I found it! (...) This is the famous tangible result which, however, you often don't have in this job, in fact, as we were talking about before. So, this is certainly one aspect. Moreover… A success is, however, also a person who gets out from here or from an orientation process in satisfied way, or in other words, a person who thinks to have grown up a bit, to have made some important step towards employment. Because in the end, the final goal remains the placement, anyway, reagrdless if this is more closely related to what we have done or maybe more the person's own responsibility. But definitely, a person who feels strengthened and supported, or who simply feels to have a person to talk with, who is able to have a exchange and to say: 'Okay , I want to talk about this and that before.' To have found a professional to discuss all these aspects, this also means success."

"Well, the most successful intervention you see, you realize it from the extent to which a person reflects your message in this moment, from the fact that you see the person getting more active and coming back, I think. That the person doesn't fall back in desperation, but that he or she comes back to continue the process with you, this is already a success, because it means that he or she understood the usefulness of the whole thing."

However, although practitioners sustain that the success of their activity should be identified first and foremost in terms of their support for and their impact on individual persons, at the same time they bewail and even criticise the fact that it is not possible to have a systematic follow up and to know whether and how assisted people eventually are able to get a job. What is interesting in this context is that practitioners not only criticise the lack of a better documentation but that they also point out that the provision of individual counselling and job search assistance is not equally matched by concrete placement support in terms of a direct matching between labour demand and supply. As practitioners point out this is not only due to lacking coordination and internal shortcomings within the AFOL, but also due to the fact that the public employment service is not seen by many employers as a considerable and effective partner for the recruitment of workforce.[52]

"Let's say that the ideal to make AFOL work really well, would be that a person comes here, that I make my first interviews and an assessment of the person's needs in order to say then: 'This person needs to do this training course in order to re-enter the labour market.' The person does this course, I don't know, and then prepares a profile of the competences developed. And that then there is a dialouge with those who are responsible fro the placements, that you say: 'This person has done this and that and he or she can do this.', and that then the person is put in contact with the companies. Let's say that this would be just the ideal world. But there is nothing of such a dialogue! This is my opinion."

"We are a bit critical, both on the fact that the visibility of AFOL from the outside is really weak as well as on the integration of our services, yes. We are working well here, surely we are all passionate about our work, though it is hard, even in our daily work, in the interviews with service users, if then we don't have this real integrations. That's it, it gets difficult. So, you do what you can, in the sense that everyone tries to do the best, but unfortunately, the decisions from the top are the ones they are. And we go on like this."

[52] This fact is, indeed, confirmed also by official data. According to data provided by Unioncamere and the Ministry of Labour, in 2012 only 2,9% of Italian enterprises made use of the Public Employment Services for staff recruitment (against 6,3% in 2010). (L'Espresso 21 November 2013: 131)

"Yes, let's say if a person, hypothetically, is doing a project helped by us, which includes orientation, then a training course, then active job search, perhaps also a internship after the training course and so on, it's a whole journey that moves towards work. But then, they often find themselves alone on this path. That's it, we can't guarantee a constant support and coaching during this process. And not just because we promote the direct activation of the service user, that is important and all right, but because we don't have, as my colleague said earlier, a fully integrated system so that the user goes to the Employment Centre Centre, registers there, then comes here for the orientation, is sent to vocational training centre, makes the course there, and eventually goes into a company from there. We are already a bit too detached internally for ensuring that to the user. Additionally, there are also the users who get lost because they don't have the tools to ensure the continuity of their job search project by their own. That is another issue again. But it would be nice to imagine AFOL organised in such a way, that a person enters, just enters that door here and can find the whole way to make till the final output which is the taking up of a job. But we are lacking in this respect."

"But if we are speaking about service provision, actually, a completely different connection would be needed, even among the offices, here, that's it… But in fact, sometimes there is an attempt to keep them, I don't say isolated, but communication is definitely not facilitated."

"The Employment Centre is no longer seen by companies as an attractive partner, I don't know how to say, in the moment an employer needs staff and this still happens! Because we always talk about the problem of finding a job, but there are employers occasionally jumping the headlines saying: 'I'm looking for staff, but I can't find anyone!' This are cases that occur. But the Employment Centre is no longer seen as a useful service for this purpose, because there are the private recruitment businesses, because they are much more in direct contacts with the market, but also due to the fact that the Employment Centre has never been distinguished for a service of careful staff selection. The Employment Centre, the old placement was fine when companies were large firms in need of high numbers of unqualified personnel. (...) If the company Pinco Pallino needs a high skilled technician, etc., it will search through other channels. Thus, let's say that job seekers enter the Employment Centre through the formal registration but it is a working exit system through matching and job offer services that is missing. This is, actually, one of the issues we discuss a lot. But if you do only talk about it, without overcoming it, not only here in the AFOL, but in most of the public, or semi-public Employment Services, in the sense of being no longer just a service for the individual job seeker, but to offer to the market an effectice placement service, to become a service also for the employers… This is perhaps the biggest challenge."

"Yes, the Public Employment Services are in dire need of upgrading and improving their image towards the private sector. (...) The employers do not solve their staff problems by means of the Public Employment Services. Not at all."

In this context it is interesting how the interviewed practitioners assess the relaunch and the organisation of the employment service. Similar to the Viennese case, they point out the nature of AFOL as a special enterprise of the Provincial Authority and thus, as being a kind of hybrid between a public agency and a private service provider. However, while in the Viennese case this double-faced nature has been discussed mainly in relation to the conflicts frontline practitioners experience between the tasks of individualised service provision on the one hand and the administration of benefits with the tasks of control and sanction on the other, this is no issue for the interviewed practitioners in Milan. Here the critique mainly concerns the effectiveness of service provision and the conflict between the old logic of the employment bureaucracy and the new image as service provider which should become a better point of reference both for job-seekers and for employers.

"Yes, the foundation of AFOL was supposed to be a form of semi-privatisation of the Public Employment Services. Because they had been part of the Provincial authority, of the department of labour policies, and today AFOL is a formally privat agengy, which however belongs to the Province. This privatisation, so to speak, was intended to render these services more agile, less bureaucratic and even more "presentable" on the market, but then things went a bit differently. Because, if a formally private agency is owned by the public authority anyway , then it is partly even a struggle of logics, so..."

"In many cases we've found ourselves of being right in the middle between the public and private sector, from many points of view, from the viewpoint of staff recruitment, of the corporate policies, and then, I don't know how to say, every once the, let's call it the private part, has tried to catch up a bit, I don't really have this cult of the private, but when the private part has tried to make a difference, in terms of speed, of promptness, of private sector logics, whenever there was such an attempt of leap, then there was a more public part that has slowed down, that has also been hindering. However, when an agency is owned by a public body,the public body gives the money and wants even to put forth its logic, understandably, but... Well, the issue is a bit complex."

"We are very convinced that there must be a Public Employment Service, because its a service the State in its different configurations and on its different levels, has to offer. But, for

example, I find that there would be nothing wrong if a qualified service of staff preselection were offered at a competitive price, but still at a price, to private enterprises. This could also help to…"

"… give visbility!"

"… recapture labour market integration as a public service, but also our image towards the private enterprises would gain from that."

What is another big issue for frontline practitioners in the AFOL context is the fact, that the effects of their work are hardly traceable, that most of the times there is no possibility of having a follow up (with the exception of certain projects connected to benefits receipt), and that, in general, orientation, job search assistance and counselling services do not produce any quantifiable output. While in Vienna, where a systematic monitoring system and a follow up for people registered with the AMS is available, practitioners rather pointed out the opposite problem of a strong quantitative control of their performance and a strict management by objectives (especially in relation to long-term unemployed), practitioners in Milan criticise that it can be hardly made visible what they are doing. Although practitioners are aware that the effective placement or taking up of a job does depend on a variety of factors and that a successful orientation or counselling does not mean that the person can, eventually, find a job, the fact of not knowing the outcome of their work is seen as a negative element. This is criticised, however, not only in relation to the fact that they themselves do often hardly see the effects of what they are doing in practice, but also in relation to the general visibility of orientation, job search assistance and counselling services. This negatively contributes also to the importance given to these services and, thus, to the political commitment and will to invest in them.

"Maybe I also lose the contact with the service user, because the user who comes here gets his or her job guidance and is satisfied, let's say. Then he or she walks out the door, saying 'Goodbye and thank you!', and we are no longer in contact. Probably this person out of here starts a training course and then seeks for a job also in a very effective way. Maybe he or she finds a job and then my job has been successful but I lose track of this. For obvious reasons, because job orientation isn't very "statisticable"..."

"... tangible..."

"No, it is not tangible."

"As orientation and guidance service we have the further difficulty, that orientation doesn't produce interesting numbers, even from a political point of view, because the politician likes

the idea of a service which creates jobs, that's it: 'How many have been hired this year?' But we aren't hiring anyone nor do we find jobs, and we are saying that very clearly also to our service users. But then, absurdly, that's exactly what we are asked by politics many times, right? But saying that we do not produce jobs, but that we rather produce "oriented" job seekers is a very qualitative matter. And we should be measured on this, on quality. And this brings us to the next big question of how to measure quality, how do you decide, yes, what is an effective service from this point of view?"

"Above us, there are the service managers who need to run the service, and running the service means that we have our intakings, that we bring the numbers, etc… Above again, the top managers are strongly related to politics, because, after all, there is the Province and AFOL is still one of its political emanations. And this means that there are also other objectives, not only to run a service in an effective way, right? It's also about visibility, strong numbers, numbers that make the service visible, the need to account for changes in comparison to the past management. These are, however, different issues and far away from our problems, I don't know how to say... Thus, discussing here about what we might do, from time to time we do raise the issue of the quality in our work, for instance. We say 'We have our opening hours and dozens of people coming in, but we can't organise an effective response for all of them, also because the target groups and their needs have changed, and so on, and so on…' So, we are asking ourselves about the quality of what we are doing, we would prefer to see fewer people and to follow them more. But for the political level this translates only into fewer numbers, because politics doesn't say or even can't flaunt to the electorate: 'We have worked well.' Politics wants to say: 'We have done a lot!'"

This lack of visibility and acknowledgement for orientation, job search-assistance and counselling is linked also to the notion of professionalism. This is a very interesting point, as the notion of professionalism is hardly addressed in the interviews with frontline practitioners in Vienna. In Milan, by contrast, practitioners frame the representations of their job in terms of a professional activity based on a helping relationship. In this sense, as it has already been pointed out, a strong user orientation and the establishment of a helping relationship are not perceived as being at odds with practitioners' given mandate. On the contrary the notion of user orientation and the importance of understanding a person's needs on the basis of a helping relationship is seen as an essential feature of doing a good job.

"Let's say that our work should actually be considered a tricky task, however, because we work with people and the foundation of our work, some of the technicality of some form, there is very supportive relationship and this thing should will require special attention."

"It's also the aspect I feel most strong in, actually, to understand what is the real need of the service user. Because the service user never comes with a simple question, it's not like this... You have to understand, to figure it out. That is, however, to understand, to interprete during the interview what the person is actually really in need of. It may start with a simple request but often there may be more underneath the surface. So, then the need is to figure it out and to define a possible path, right?"

"It's hard to explain what job orientation and guidance is about, because it's not really a recognised profession, so, it's not the lawyer, the doctor, one of the classical professions, it's, thus, very difficult to make understand what job orientation is. Ehm, for sure it requires a lot of empathy, listening skills, patience. So, let's say that these are the capabilities a good job counsellor must have. It's a job that fascinates me a lot, because it is still the helping relationship, about being able to support those in need, who have difficulties as for both job and training."

"Yes, then everyone puts in their professionalism and passion and so on, and, actually, does a job which is still difficult, well, complicated."

The notion of giving support is also seen as important for a better service provision orientation of Public Employment Services. Thus, the interviewed practitioners underline how an up to date professional attitude and a certain way of understanding the job contributes also to a better offer of services, and in general, to improve also the image of the Public Employment Service.

"Now I say it, because we are young, for not denying anything our colleagues from whom we have learned all the administrative and bureaucratic part, but it's just about the mental attitude! Of course, they have been working here for 30 years, and they have always worked in a certain way, with a certain approach. We came here, however, with another background, with different experiences, and we probably put ourselves more in the shoes of the service user because before we had to look for job, too (...). So, this is definitely an added value, I think, if you as staff have your own story which is closer to those of the service users, this can be helpful, not only for the famous empathy. you know, but also for putting yourself in the shoes of the service user in order to better meet their needs and expectations, right?"

"Each of us has a certain background, there's who graduated, who holds a master's degree, whatsoever, so, I think that at the level of staff competences we are, at least in my opinion,

from what I know from my colleagues, we are quite well prepared here for what our job is, in most cases, yes."

"Yes, it's really about the mindset. The colleagues, let's say the long-serving ones, for sure, we were given, they have passed on to us all the information about administrative and bureaucratic matters. Of course when it comes to job guidance, well, we also had our moments of confrontation, the staff meetings, which are not always easy to organise, because we are many here, where each of us told about the own experience in order to share it with the colleagues and to make known to the colleagues who maybe have been involved in the administration of mobility benefits for twenty years that the people on the mobility benefit can also be offered a quality service, that they could say to them: 'Look, there is a project which might be something for you!' So, well, in a more service oriented way of accommodating the service users, in order to give a complete service, not only saying: 'Ok, I register you on the mobility list. (...) This is definitely an added value!"

However, also some practitioners in Milan criticise the lacking recognition of their work from the outside. Some of the interviewed practitioners emphasise that the importance of their job is often disregarded and not reflected neither by the amount of their salaries nor by the training offers for practitioners which are, actually, rather non existent. One practitioner points out that it would be important to have a better formal recognition of the job and to regulate the access to this professional field.

"Yes, the job guidance counsellor is generally seen as, well, as very useful for sure, because it is undeniable that in this period of risk or of still ongoing crisis we are going through, this job might be helpful and so it is much celebrated in words. But then, from an economic viewpoint,it is still considered primarily as a cost, not as a resource. That's due to the fact that the next step, in the sense that the counsellor will cost you, but then he or she helps the economy because it "produces", so to say, employment, this step is not necessarily there. In this sense, the output of job orientation is not, it is not money, I don't know how to say, orientation services cost but they don't have an immediate and quantifiable output. And in this sense everything which has to do with our job is primarily seen as a cost. Even our salary is already considered as high, not to speak about the idea to offer us some training, it's said: "What's more, you are costing us money!" So, well, there's also this aspect."

"What I am doing now is, actually, professional job guidance and orientation. I'd like, however, more importance to be attached on a better official definition of this professional profile. It is spoken about for years now, probably you know it, about a professional register

of career guidance counsellors, about giving, however, also a better formal recognition to this profession, but at the moment it seems as there weren't many developments in this regard."

Comparing these findings with the findings from the interviews with practitioners in Vienna shows some interesting differences and gives some possible hints in relation to the debate on professionalising activation work. In both the cases, the issues of help and support and the notion of a helping relationship are at the forefront of practitioners representations of their practice. There is, however, a striking difference. As it has been pointed out, practitioners in Vienna frame the notion of helping people prevalently as a their own concern associating it to a private sphere of doing the job in a personally acceptable way rather than to the definition and the mandate of the job as such. In the representations given by practitioners in Milan this is very different. They frame the notion of help and the importance of a helping relationship as essential feature of the job. At the same time they stress the professional character of what they are doing and underline the importance of a better professional recognition. On the contrary, when practitioners in Vienna speak about their job, they hardly emphasise its professional character and the notion of a better professional recognition seems not to be an issue at all. This is very interesting against the background that frontline practitioners in Vienna are faced much more with the dilemmas of activation which crop up clearly on the street-level and in their practice context. In Milan, the paradigm of activation is not taken up in such a stringent way, and activation work is, actually, still split up to a large extent in classical bureaucratic tasks carried out by administrative staff on the one hand and, on the other, services provided by practitioners who underline the professional nature of what they are doing. It can, thus, be stated that the demanding and the enabling side of activation hardly come together and do not have to be administered by the same person. In fact, the interview practitioners are faced only with the "softer" side of activation, while in Austria practitioners are faced with both faces of activation and, thus, much more exposed to its ambiguities and the resulting dilemmas. This gives some interesting hints on the possibilities of a professionalisation project in activation work. In Milan, where individualised service provision is not, or only loosely connected with, demanding aspects, practitioners frame their activity and their self-conceptions much more within the patterns of orientation and counselling and as a professional activity. In Vienna where frontline practice is much more part of a stringent implementation of an activation approach, and thus, much more "activation work", the notion of professionalism hardly emerges in the interviews and the challenges of activation work are depicted as a

highly individualised project and as a personal challenge to get the job done in a personally acceptable manner. This raises the question if the notion of professionalism can withstand in the context of activation or, put in a more positive way, which preconditions a professionalisation project of activation work would require.

4.2.2. Activation as support on (half) the way towards employment

As has been pointed out, the representations given by frontline practitioners in the Milan context put the notions of help and support to the forefront and frame them as professional tasks. At the same time the interviewed practitioners do not experience that much the immediate pressure to bring people into work. Accordingly, the orientation towards work is present (and represented) rather as a long-term objective which is not immediately connected with or visible as result of what practitioners are doing. In this sense, both the concrete problem of how to get a job as well as the policy ideas on how to deal with the problem of unemployment seem to be perceived as rather "external" problems, as being somewhere "out there" rather than as the concrete problems of practice. Accordingly, the representations of practice focus strongly on the helping relationship and on practical choices of giving support while a critical awareness of structural problems and problematic aspects of the policy framework is not completely absent but rather detached from the concrete issues in practice. Against this background, it is interesting to see how the notion of activation is embraced and interpreted by the interviewed practitioners.

The findings from the interviews with practitioners in Milan suggest that the notion of activation is perceived and understood mainly in a positive way of giving support on the way towards employment. In this sense, the focus on dimensions of giving help and support is not only a personal or professional claim kept up by practitioners but it reflects the way the notion of activation is embodied in the given practice context. As it has been already emphasised, due to both the policy framework and the organisational context, the demanding and enabling dimension of activation are kept rather separated and accordingly the orientation patterns the practitioners are geared to in practice reflect a rather positive view of activation as support while its demanding dimension and the possible tensions and contradictions between the two sides of the coin have little relevance in practice. Moreover, the interpretation of the notion of activation seems not to depend that much on how target groups are perceived and on how their situation and willingness is assessed. Differentiatons made by practitioners in relation to different target groups hardly question the nature of

supporting service provision as such but rather concern the appropriateness and suitability of different forms of support for job-seekers with different competences and needs.

4.2.2.1. Activation as orientation and awareness raising

In this sense, an important interpretation pattern is related to the dimensions of orientation and awareness raising. Practitioners highlight the importance for many job-seekers to get clearer ideas both on the situation and the possibilities on the labour market as well as on their own ideas and competences and on which strategies to adopt for job-seeking. Accordingly, an important aspect of service provision is seen in the assessment of competences, in finding out possible strategies and channels for a better aimed job-seeking and in helping to develop individual qualification and job search projects. As has already been mentioned, these services are not connected with concrete matching services and the provision of placement offers. The objective of service provision is rather focused on orienting and enabling the individual person for his or her job-seeking in an autonomous way.

> *"So, our goal is definitely orientation counselling and we really emphasize this as soon as we meet the service users, in the sense that for this purpose we are going to really analyse with them all the tools needed for autonomous, proactive job-seeking. And we also give and try to really pass over the message that orientation and job guidande counseling is not about, how can I say say, giving them the job offers, but it's about providing them with the tools to be used by their own (...)."*

> *"It's orientation, supporting people in their professional orientation and choices and supporting them in their job seeking activity, so strengthening the tools for job seeking, giving support in relation to both the choices and the instrumentes, that's it, basically."*

> *"Ok, as the colleagues already said, besides showing them the right channels it's also important to raise their awareness, right, about what they should go to do, what has to be done. Because they arrive here, I notice that very much, it's not to say that they would be presumptious, nohow, but I also say it to them, that it is not a critique but that job orientation means also to guide them, to coach them towards a realistic, feasible choice (...)."*

The importance of this aspect of awareness raising depends on the different target groups practitioners encounter. Especially young people have already grown up in a climate of crisis and they are, hence, generally well aware of the difficulties of getting a job and

what they need is mainly orientation and support in improving their qualification and research strategies. The situation is a bit different for older target groups who lost their job and find themselves faced with the challenge of finding a job in circumstances they haven't known before.

> *"Sometimes there is more awareness among the youngest ones, more than among the less younger ones in their late twenties, towards their thirties. Because a nineteen years old (...) is already a bit, let's say, a child of the crisis, somehow. (...). It's a youngster whose parents probably have, they could belong to a generation that is, so to say, half the generation before us, however, who know what the crisis is, who maybe are living it, and so do maybe also their children, they might have a perception of the crisis, also through the working life of their parents. The thirty-somethings might still be the children of the permanent job, I don't know how to say, so maybe what they have experienced at home is still a bit different, even though they have, on the other hand, better information due to their studies or because the have already started to experience the difficulties of labour market entry by themselves. Well, then the term young people formally refers to those aged from 18 to 29 years, but nowadays it's not clear anymore who the young people are. From a working age perspective, with 35 years you might be considered as old by the market and at the same time you could still be young because you are still looking, if not for the first, then maybe for your second job."*

4.2.2.2. Activation as practical support

Enabling job seekers and providing them with the right instruments for autonomously seeking a job is seen as the main goal of the interviewed frontline practitioners. Practitioners point out that this requires often very concrete practical support, especially for young people looking the first time for a job and for low-skilled job-seekers who are not familiar with very basic issues like writing a CV, finding the right places where to find a job, or preparing for a job interview. For these target groups AFOL Milano offers special projects and low-threshold services where people can just come in and get advice for how to look for a job and practical support for the preparation of application documents. The interviewed practitioners point out the importance of helping people in need through these very basic steps.

> *"Maybe you try to get more concrete, to give more assistance to the person and, thus, you help with, or you do together also more practical things, sending the CV for instance, and so on."*

"(...) or simply a good adjustment of their CV. They go away having discovered a world, right, after we have shown them that the CV has to be aligned in a certain way. Because they arrive saying: 'I've sent 40 CVs, and I didn't even get one call by anybody! How is it possible that no employer is even calling me?!' Then you try to go deeper into this saying: 'Okay, but how did you send it? It's not just about quantity, it's the quality. Let's see how you did it, the channels that you used, how you used them, and so on…' That's the other thing we often do, trying to really start from them, from their experiences, also from their experiences of job-seeking in order to find out about critical issues which can then be improved. Like making them understand that it's not enough to send 40 CVs, I take up again his example, because many of them commence like this, but that it's also about how it is sent, for which purposes, about having read the job announcement very well, about having understood the requirements, what is really asked."

"Also with the presentation letter for a blind application, many of them make use of it, but not the right way, or they don't even know about this possibility, so, in case of a blind application we try to strengthen this aspect, to say: 'Attach also a letter of presentation to your CV which points out clearly your motivations to apply for that position, and especially with this company.' So, this is another tool we go to explore together, to analyse, sometimes, if they have already written it, we have a look at it together, we try to start from what they have already prepared, go through it together to correct and to improve it, or we explain how to do it, we give them a template and we say that they can send it to us by e-mail, when they have prepared it, and we will have a look at it, correct it and send it then back to them, in order to give effective support for job seeking and for making an application."

"It's the asset, it should be the asset of this project, that we don't do these groups where we say, well, the interview, you have to answer like this, these are usually the questions. We really go into the particular, we sit down together with the person and then, as my colleaugue already said, we go to have a look at the job offers together, we go through their CV together. So, here again, we don't say in general: 'Well, the CV, these are the rules, do it!' We put ourselves physically there to transcribe, to improve, to delete, to add, you know, together with the person. In a way that they remain thrilled about, because we remake it, we revise it together from the beginning, and then we send it to them by e-mail and they really experience that as a valid support, because it's not that you can find such a service everywhere, revising the CV together, for instance, which might seem trivial but for them it's already a good kick-off, for starting then their job seeking, yes."

An important aspect in this context is, that the practitioners are quite free in their time management and that they can decide where to go into details and how much time to apply, for instance, in helping a job-seeker preparing his or her CV or in simulating a job interview.

> *"It's fairly left to the freedom of the individual practitioner, but the tools to be used are primarily matched to the needs of the person, so it really depends on what the person needs, this is the basis, yes. If it is the job interview, for instance, we use a lot the platform of città dei mestieri, which has this interview simulation tool. We simulate with them a job interview and then we are going to discuss on how they've responded and on what have been their strengths and weaknesses in the interview. So we try to simulate by means of a video what could be their future job interview."*

> *"No, there isn't any rule. In the past, we set as a rule the maximum of half an hour per person, but then prevails the rule of common sense, anyway, if you see that you're exceeding too much and that there are many people waiting, for instance. But it's obvious that for doing orientation there musn't be too many rules, I think. Because you can't even just go and suddenly stop the interview with a person, so it's quite left to you, to your discretion. But yes, if you see that the person needs it, you try to give them some things to do by their own and to make them come back. Because you can't even replace yourself to the person and do everything for them, that's not good. So, we don't have any precise rule (...)."*

4.2.2.3. Activation as motivation

An important interpretation pattern which emerges also from the interviews with practitioners in Milan, is, however, the idea to transmit the right message to people, to motivate them in their job-seeking efforts and to provide them not only with better strategies and instruments but also with the right determination and "grit". As practitioners point out, to which extent and how this message has to be given, depends on the target groups but also on the individual situation and on the relation between the practitioner and the client. The importance of giving the right message is, however, represented mainly in a positive way, as empowering and motivating people, as telling them that they need to have "that extra oomph". Of course, this concentration on the motivated self with the right attitudes and skills can generally be questioned, as the fact of getting a job depends not only on the endeavour of the individual job-seeker. Anyway, in the Milan case, where the interviewed practitioners work with their clients prevalently (and in some projects exclusively) on a voluntary basis

and, thus, with people who do generally have better chances, motivation is less at risk to get the bitter taste of cynicism.

> *"Maybe with some young people the most important thing is to give them the message of 'Move yourself!', while with the 50 years old person comprehension might be more important, or the message has to be given, however, in a different way. And well, then there come into play also the style and the expertise of the individual practitioner as well as the trust the service user has towards them."*

> *"Because during the interview you realize whether the person must be a bit re-motivated, because motivation is the first requirement you need to look for a job, and then you try to work a a bit on this aspect, (...) you try to convey some oomph, first of all, some positive thinking. Well, apart from that, often, or better always, when they come here it's already the fact that they find a person who doesn't treat them with superficiality, but is willing to listen to them, this is already motivating to them. (...) And so already this makes them go away a bit happier, the fact that they have spoken with a person who has transmitted some positive feelings, right? And then you try to build on also on this, on the point that if they don't have any motivation, any grit, that the success of finding a job depends only on them, I strongly point on this aspect. Because if the motivation doesn't really start from them, they won't even be able to pass it on to an employer who should hire them. And they won't have the grit to really search for a job, to put into play everything, all these things, to question also themselves, to think what to do, how to present oneself in a better way, because it's all a result from that. That's it."*

> *"Indeed, by orientating the service users we can also re-motivate, re-activate them. So, this might be our function, too, to give kind of a boost, right? What could be the activation of the user."*

> *"But if we see that there is no motivation we are the first to say: 'Look, it's an opportunity that we give you, you are to choose whether to participate or not, we do not force anyone here.' Yes, because we try to get people who are really interested, also in order to avoid situations of abandonment afterwards."*

However, here again, the problematic aspect is that all the efforts made for orienting, motivating and practically supporting people on their way towards employment are not supported by concrete matching and job placement services and, furthermore, often even not matched by basic social security measures. Thus, it can be summarised for the Milan case,

that the practice context allows for a rather positive interpretation of the notion of activation. Practitioners emphasise the patterns of orientation, support and motivation as positive and unconstrained activation aimed to enable job-seekers, to promote their autonomy and improve their strategies and instruments for job-seeking. However, this kind of activation work occurs mainly within an orientation or counselling paradigm with loose (or without any) connections to the system of benefit administration (where applicable) and without the concrete connection between job-seekers and available jobs on the labour market. Thus, the interviewed practitioners can concentrate, one the one hand, on the positive dimension of activation work, on the other one, the findings suggest that the "activation story" finishes there, that job-seekers, eventually are left to their own devices (and resources!) and often even without a minimum of material security.

> *"Well, perhaps the critical aspect is not to know where to refer people afterwards, thus, leaving them a bit alone, on their on. Which is perhaps also one of my personal problems, because I always put a bit of assistentialism in this work, but I shouldn't do that, because we should just limit ourselves to orientation counselling, so maybe that's one of my own, personal issues. But, yes, I don't know."*

4.2.3. "Rowing against" or "not singing from the same sheet of music": The active-passive divide and practitioners' impact on the street-level production of social citizenship

As has been pointed out, a significant trait of the Milanese context is both the institutional (within the AFOL context) and practical divide between passive and active labour market policy measures. The implications of this divide are clearly reflected in the findings from the interviews. The interviewed practitioners are hardly confronted with the demanding side of activation and this fact of course affects the representations and interpretations practitioners give of their job and the way they contextualise it in a broader policy context. As a matter of fact, the interviewed practitioners interpret activation rather positively as enabling people to better perform in their autonomous job-seeking and they represent their job as a professional activity which requires listening to people and understanding their needs. However, practitioners themselves point out that they concentrate only to one dimension of activation which is not matched by other measures or further steps for bringing people into work. The interesting aspect in this context is that when speaking

about their own work, the interviewed practitioners emphasise the enhancement of the individual autonomy and the improvement of individual job-seeking strategies and skills. At the same time, however, the interviewed practitioners criticise that people (especially those who receive benefits) are not urged to accept available jobs by their colleagues doing the administrative work at the employment centre. Although also the Italian legislative framework has seen a tightening of the benefits regime, making the receipt of benefits more conditional upon job-seeking activities and the acceptance of available jobs, some of the interviewed practitioners (even though not directly involved in the respective tasks) point out, or better, they presume and criticise that these provisions are in fact not always implemented in practice and that the unemployed are neither given job offers nor urged to accept them.

> *"Well, for those who are registered at the Employment Centre, who receive benefits, the Employment Centre provides them with job suggestions, in theory, right? And if you don't accept them for the third time, you lose the unemployment benefit. In practice, however, this does not always happen, so it's difficult even for the Employment Centre. What we perceive when we do the interviews here, is that people, the classical thing they say is that they are never contacted by the Employment Centre. So, maybe because the world of Milan with all its industries and businesses is very big and so it's not possible to have this daily intersection with all the job offers? That's at least what we perceive."*
>
> *"No, in fact, it doesn't happen. That's what I said before, what should be done..."*
>
> *"... what should be done!"*
>
> *" ... because then, I mean, for the state unemployment benefits are an "investment", so to say, so if there isn't any form of control that the unemployed person is a person who is effecticely looking for work, who accepts in case of job offers, who wants to remain active on the labour market, then it's really difficult, right? Then, each investment is, I don't say for nothing, but…"*
>
> *"Anyway, that's what we perceive, yes, but as we are not physically working at the Employment Centre, we don't really know this, whether it actually happens or not. That's what we are told by our service users."*
>
> *"Yes, this lacking contact between the unemployed person and the Employment Centre. There's simply made the registration and then you receive unemployment benefits, but at least I've never heard one saying that they would have been provided any job offers by the Employment Centre. So, maybe this is a bit a lack..."*
>
> *"... of the system, right!"*

These findings suggest, that the interviewed practitioners stay on the "sunny" side of activation which allows them to represent in rather positive terms what they are doing, to frame it as a professional activity and to claim that it should also be recognised as such. At the same time they criticise that "on the other side" there is not enough done to demand active job-seeking and the acceptance of available jobs and to control the conditions for benefit receipt. In this context it is interesting to see how benefit receipt is automatically understood or even insinuated as rendering people passive or as one practitioner points out as "rowing against" the efforts made for activating people. In this sense, the findings suggest that there is a strong active-passive divide not only in policy administration and service organisation, but also in practitioners' way of thinking. The interviewed practitioners hardly challenge the idea that people have to be activated for finding a job (on their own!) and that the receipt of benefits is rather counterproductive in relation to this aim.

> *"Although of active labour market policies is spoken in Italy for several years now, the passive labour market policies continue to row against, because there are also those ones. And it's not only the system of benefits, but the Employment Centres continues to register people as did the old placement service (collocamento) and then the person expects the phone call with the job surprise, or all the private placement agencies, the temporary employment agencies that say: 'Well, come here and do the interview with us and then we'll call you when there is a job for you.' So there is still a whole world of passive labour market policies that induces people to believe that there is someone, a service who seeks the the jobs for them (...)."*

> *"Well, my personal perception is that in the case of passive policies, if there is a form of income alternative, many people do not actively seeking work as long as they have this alternative, that's it…"*
> *"... yes, yes, that's the other thing, the other side of the coin, exactly…"*
> *"... it's the other side of the coin. This is our, you know, perception, this is what happens, in short, it's the law, and of course, especially these times, in a moment like this, who receives a benefit of any kind tries to keep it close as long as possible…"*
> *"... and they don't activate themselves, in this situation…"*
> *"... and don't activate themselves, indeed."*

In this context, practitioners criticise in the first instance the short time work schemes intended to protect the employees within the employment contract pointing out the risk, that people are parked in this kind of benefit scheme without even having the incentive to look

for a new job. In this regard, some of the interviewed practitioners point out, that it would be important to combine also the benefit receipt from short time work schemes with activating measures and to make it conditional upon job-seeking efforts as it is, at least by law, already the case for the unemployment benefit (*indennità di discoccupazione*) and the exceptional application of both the mobility and the short time work schemes (*ammortizzatori sociali in deroga*). In general, making benefits receipt conditional and better combining passive and active measures is seen as an important strategy which allows to approach also those unemployed who couldn't be reached otherwise. In this sense, the cases in which a stronger activation approach has already been applied are, on the one hand, seen as positive. On the other, however, practitioners who had already experiences with mandatory programmes point out that working with people, often even older unemployed people, who are obliged to follow certain activation schemes is much more difficult and that working with young people and on a voluntary basis is a strong advantage for doing their job. Thus, the findings suggest that the interviewed practitioners are rather ambivalent in this regard. When they speak about general policy goals they advocate for stronger activation but when it comes down to their frontline practice they point out that it is better to work with people on a voluntary basis.

> *"It must be said that the social safety net in Italy is really poorly structured, especially the short time work schemes, because in front of a labour market that offers mainly fixed term contracts, a benefit regime like the short work scheme that promises to employers 50% of tax relief for three years if they hire on permament contracts, is an answer that is misleading. You'd have to put the contribution relief on temporary work, because this is what's available. The employees start to think: 'Well, I have the short time work benefit for a year, and then who knows, maybe they will renew it.' (...) And unfortunately, there have been national cases which are absolutely misleading from this point of view, with people on short work schemes for years! So how can you tell this people: 'Let the short time work benefit and accept this temporary work of three months, because then, who knows, maybe it is renewed or it will end in a permanent contract.' So, with all the emphasis on active labour market policies, on the other hand there's a continuos rowing against. It is also true that these benefit schemes were designed this way in times when the contracts were still permamenent and when the job market was less depressed than today, so back then they had more sense. With the mobility benefit, as the colleague says, it's different, because a person on the mobility benefit is an unemployed person to all effects and therefore they can easily also work for a month, or two or three. Then, when it finishes they can go back onto the mobility benefit, that'it, this allows for a more flexible inside and outside of the labour market and benefit receipt. While the short time work scheme is simply a parking lot."*

"Well, there would be needed a system to better link the short time work scheme benefit with alternative job offers and incentives to take up another job, by law, as it is the case for the unemployment benefit, right? In order to, I don't know, I make you one, maximum two proposals you can refuse, but the third one has to be accepted otherwise you lose your right for benefit receipt. I believe in a much more Anglo-Saxon world approach, where this link is much stronger. But the problem is that this rules in Italy are struggling to come into law and to be respected."

"As to the policies, in spite of the limitations we've talked before, like the short time work schemes, the weak active policies, I think that compared to the past, nowadays there is a stronger activation of people, sure, for good or evil, regardless of whether they are living that in a positive or negative way. But the fact of not just sitting at home and probably also avoiding resulting situations of moonlightning as it had been the norm before when people were on benefits, in this sense it helped a lot, the fact to obligate them to come here, to do something. It's true that you force them in a way, but on the other hand you make them know services they wouldn't get in touch with otherwise. So they are service users we can get in contact with this way, who wouldn't be reachable otherwise."

"People who are on benefits due to the exceptional application of the short work scheme (cassa integrazione in deroga) must, according to the union's agreement in case of cessation of production, company failure, or job rotation, for instance, they have to attend a process of, until two years ago it was of requalification, since the last year it's of replacement. (...) Yes, there were also those people in who had done the same job for twenty, thirty years and who were forced to do these retrainings and I don't hide that this has been very difficult, you know, the famous doing the interview with someone who says: 'Listen I've been putting bolts for twenty years now, what do you want to offer me?' or 'Ok, I'll go to do this training course, but I am 56 years old, anyway, I am missing the four years to retirment!' And we met a lot of them…"

"Well, for me, personally, in relation to this project, its asset is the voluntariness of the service user, the fact that they are motivated to join the project. (...) In the case of people on benefits, for me, the difference stands really in the management of the interview, the fact that, yes some of them could also develop a motivation within the mandatory context, but others were just seeing the obligation, the fact of being forced to do something and that's it. With those it's much more difficult to pass on the message that maybe this support service, this training could also be helpful in a way, that it might be still good for something, that it should be taken as an apportunity anyway, right?"

"They experienced it only as an obligation, as an unpleasant duty. And this way they don't even try to make advantage of it, ot those initiatives, the possibility to take a training course and to maybe improve their competences or to challenge themselves by doing a skills assessment. They lived it only as an obligation, what on the other hand, if you're missing only one year to retirement…"

"... it's understandable, though…"

"... well, of course, you understand the situation and, thus, you try to accommodate them, but if the mandatory character of the programme makes these requirements you either accept the offer made or you risk to lose the benefit, right? But it's not always that easy, to pass on the message to live it more as an opportunity than as an obligation, a mere coercion."

However, generally the receipt of benefit is rather regarded as hindering successful activation than as a necessary requirement for informed and autonomous job-seeking (which is depicted, though, as the main objective of practitioners' interventions). One practitioner points out that getting benefits allows for job seeking more calmly, but in general the findings suggest that practitioners embrace the idea that benefits represent a measure which causes passivity without even raising the problem that many unemployed people in Italy don't even have access to unemployment benefits or minimum income maintenance. According to practitioners, the important thing is to use the benefit as a springboard rather than a cushion. In this context, individual behavior and willingness are seen as important criteria, even though the interviewed practitioners are not directly involved in assessing these characteristics of their clients in order to categorize them for further interventions.

"Well, on the one hand, who has access to social security benefits, to short work or mobility benefits, has a better ease to develop a career plan that includes a series of steps to be achieved, has more eonomic leeway to tackle the job search with time, it's not rest anyway, but with the necessary time."

"Here you really notice the difference between those who understand that being in this exceptional circumstances, on short work benefits, is a good time to be used in order to look for another job with a certain ease and those who are just sitting on the benefit."

Even the findings from Milan suggest that practitioners interpret unemployment often as a cultural problem and that the normative idea of the active citizen is associated rather

with individual and cultural attitudes than with structural problems and the question for the preconditions of active citizenship.

> *" (...) also the current labour market reform which is, actually, spoken about a lot, it's interesting, but the problem is also a bit a cultural one, isnt'it?"*

> *"Yes, let's say that in some cases there is a cultural obstacle. (...) There is still an entire world of passive labour market policies which induce people to believe that there would be a service where others find a job for them. For which we often also have a problem of frustration of the service user, so to say, in the moment of the service agreement, when they are told by us that we are an orientation service and that we are going to explain them how to look for work, but that we definitely do not search for jobs with them. And this goes up against very strong expectations, of course. This is one aspect, another aspect is the culture of job seeking, which, in spite of everything, is still lacking. Also people of a certain cultural and educational background are lacking it, there's still this idea that someone else seeks a job for you, and it is deeply rooted also in those who would have the personal skills ans tools, because of their studies, their former job experiences, the good possibilities they've had.*

> *"(...) If you want to reform the labour market and to guarantee benefits in different situations, actually, there has been even a debate on a guaranteed minimum income, and so on, but if the premises are the ones we talked about before, also on a cultural level, it's clear that we, well…"*
> *"… that we are a bit backwards."*

The important point, however, is that in the Milanese case these interpretations are less relevant in terms of social constructions and categorisations of their clients as the basis for their further processing. Practitioners in Milan are less involved in assessing the willingness and individual attitudes as conditions for support and in defining contractual agreements with the individual person. This means that, eventually, the interviewed practitioners in Milan are less required to act as agents of an activating state and that their practice consists in offering services in a rather secluded sphere and within a service provision and counselling paradigm which has not to cope immediately with the dilemmas of activation and the highly political question of calibrating rights and duties of the people they encounter on the frontline of services. This fact allows for them to speak about their job expressing a rather classical idea of professionalism as helping their clients without taking sufficiently into account issues of power and all the difficult questions to which activation as

dominant policy paradigm tries to respond (in a sometimes better and often even worse way). At the same time, however, practitioners' role and, thus, their interpretations and meanings are in this context of lesser impact on the street-level shaping of the given policies and, eventually, on the street-level production of social citizenship.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Administering sticks and carrots or becoming "activist" professionals?

This doctoral thesis has been intended to critically analyse the implications of activation policies on frontline work in Public Employment Services. As has been pointed out in the theoretical part of the work, at the centre of activation as the dominant policy paradigm in current welfare state development lies the emphasis on the notion of the active citizen who is made responsible and enabled for his or her economic self-reliance and societal integration, first and foremost through gainful employment on the labour market. In this sense, the notion of activation has an inherently double nature, or better a janus-faced appearance as demanding on the one, and as enabling on the other side. The demanding side of activation is intended to remove options for labour market exit by tightening benefit schemes both in their amount and duration and to make benefit receipt more conditional upon individual activity requirements and through stricter availability criteria and sanctioning clauses. The enabling side of activation provides for the investment in classical tools of active labour market policies, in fiscal and subsidy tools intended to making work pay and, as a new but crucial feature, individualised service provision to enhance the employability of the individual person. However, although the overall aim of bringing the individual employability in line with realistic options on the labour market is highly mediated through external factors of economic development and the volatile character of current labour markets, even in times of economic crisis this seems not to derogate the strong focus on the notion of activation fitting well into existing normative patterns in society and, thus, into current ideas about the welfare state, its tasks and its forms of intervention.

The interesting question, however, is how the notion of activation is taken up and interpreted concretely and how demanding and enabling elements are combined both conceptually and in practice. This question concerns of course formal policy design, as it has been pointed out also by the tour d'horizon on the debate in comparative welfare state research which confirms the broad shift towards activation in all European welfare states. At the same time, however, the comparative perspective has shown that convergence occurs mainly on the ideational level and on a programmatic which implies the departure from a "one-size-fits-all" welfare state towards more decentred, diversified and individualised forms of welfare state intervention. In this sense, one of the essential features in the shift towards activation is given by higher degrees of lower-level discretion which contribute, eventually,

to different outcomes in terms of what activation concretely means. It has, thus, been pointed out that the analysis of activation policy cannot focus only on the formal side of policy, but that it has to look also on its operational side which goes down until the lowest level of policy making, i.e. the encounter between the policy and its target groups on the ground or rather, in the case of activation services, between frontline practitioners and individual service users. Going down from policy ideas to "policy practice" (not necessarily meant in its positive understanding in the social work debate!) has shown that activation as a highly ambiguous and slippery concept implies different dynamics and dilemmas which eventually concentrate in the burning glass of practice and, as the findings show, turn out in what frontline practitioners are charged to do.

This means also that what activation eventually means is shaped by interpretations and meanings along the policy making and implementing chain, and that the importance given to demanding and enabling aspects and the balance between them is not only a matter of formal policy design but can vary in each individual case. This shows, once again, how working directly with people in the form of the provision of welfare and applied social policy has direct implications for social citizenship as practice rather than as a status, or as Lorenz makes the point, as "a force field which is constantly in the making" (Lorenz forthcoming). This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of activation aimed at recalibrating citizens' rights and duties and at making support and benefit receipt conditional upon the individual responsibility to behave well and to prove the required effort for taking up gainful employment on the labour market.

Against this background and based on the assumption that frontline work matters, this work has explored the role of practitioners in the implementation of activation policies at the frontline of Public Employment Services in the two different contexts of Public Employment Services in the cities of Vienna and Milan. According to the conceptual framework referred to, this analysis has focused on the use of discretion, on the exertion of power in situ and on the role of practitioners' sense-making as meaning in action, as practical judgment and as policy making and shaping on the ground. The research project aimed at understanding how frontline practitioners represent and interpret what they are doing and how they interpret their role and contextualise it in a wider policy framework. In this context, a particular focus has been put on the analysis of their understanding of the notion of activation. Furthermore the analysis has taken into account the discretional spaces frontline practitioners have in practice and the ways they make use of them against the

background of their understanding and their social constructions of the people they encounter as job-seekers, as benefit recipients and citizens.

The findings clearly confirm that the shift towards activation has important implications for the concrete practice context of the interviewed practitioners. Their representations show that practitioners have indeed a crucial role in making activation policy work and in pursuing its aim of a more individualised approach intended to make public support conditional on individual activity requirements, to enhance individual responsibility and to ensure or change individual behaviour. In this sense, the findings suggest clearly the increasing importance of welfare state intervention founded on "people changing technologies" (Meyers et al. 1998).

This is, however, much more evident in the Viennese case which is characterised by a clearer approach to activation and its stringent implementation. In Vienna the demanding and the enabling side of activation do really come together in practice and the findings suggest that practitioners play indeed a crucial role in combining and balancing demanding and enabling elements in individual situations. This is, however, not that evident at the first sight as practitioners have to follow quite standardised procedures, rules and legal provisions which define, for instance, sanctions for non-compliance as well as exact time spans within which people are required to take up a job or to start a training activity. All the activities carried out by frontline practitioners have to be documented well and there is a strict managerial control of what they are doing with particular attention on how many of the enrolled clients take up a job or pass over into long-term unemployment. However, the findings clearly suggest that beneath this regulative framework practitioners dispose of discretional spaces which they use in order to get the job done somehow in practice. This is not particularly surprising as the interviewed practitioners have to cope with the essential paradox of street level bureaucracies of being, on the one hand, highly regulated in order to achieve the intended policy goals, while on the other constantly requiring improvisation and responsiveness at the same time. But the interesting point is how the use of discretion occurs against the background of practitioners' perception of policy ideas, of the interpretations of their role, and of the ways they see and assess the individual client. The findings suggest that indeed different frontline identities can be identified. Although all the interviewed practitioners, at least in a first instance, put the notions of help and support at the forefront of the representations of what they are doing, their deeper narrative accounts suggest that there are those who assume a stronger caring attitude taking individual difficulties more into account and putting into question the given rules, those who assume a bureaucratic attitude

pointing out that they cannot help but just follow the rules, and those who argue in favour of the bigger policy goal of bringing people out of benefit receipt and into work as quickly as possible. In this sense, it can be stated that practitioners embrace policy goals and the orientation towards work in different ways and the findings suggest that this makes a difference for how they actually move in practice. In this context it is also interesting how the notion of activation is interpreted. The findings suggest that there are different orientation patterns of activation as qualification or as motivation, but also as disciplinary measure or as the "administration" of the unemployed. These orientation patterns depend strongly on how practitioners see and on how they construct their clients, on how they assess their attitudes and how they categorise them for further processing. In this regard it turns out clearly that the way the notion of activation is embraced depends strongly on how practitioners assess the employability (the promising ones against the no-hopers) and the willingness (those who need the "kick in the ass" or the educative experience of being without benefits against those who "deserve another chance" or even an (undocumented) exception) of the encountered target groups. The findings suggest that these interpretations and different uses of discretional spaces are essential to make the policy somehow work and as such they are also (and in part tacitly) accepted. Thus, beneath a strict regulative framework practitioners do not only find discretional spaces but they are also required to make use of them, sometimes in order to exercise authority very clearly and in round terms, sometimes even to let someone slip somehow through, depending on their assessment of the individual situation. From a critical perspective this importance of the individual assessment made by frontline practitioners has to be seen as the opening up of the personal sphere for the political and governmental project of activation. This is how the activating state works, not only by decree or by the passing of provisions as formal policy, but through its situated agents who can influence what activation eventually means. In this sense, as practitioners themselves admit, it can make a big difference for clients which frontline practitioner they encounter, for better or for worse. At the same time it makes clear, that activation work is a highly individualised (and at least potentially also arbitrary) project where people run the risk to be at the mercy of whom they encounter. Pointing out this critical aspects is not intended to criticise or to blame frontline practitioners. The interviewed practitioners have spoken about these issues as the difficulties of their job in a very open and authentic way showing themselves to be aware of critical aspects and careful about not doing wrong or to excessively harm their clients. However, these latter concerns and the challenge to find an acceptable way to do this job are represented by practitioners as very private concerns, as

their very own and private business. This shows how activation work is a highly individualised project also for frontline practitioners themselves who are exposed to a precarious self-reliance in coping with the difficulties of their job.

The situation is quite different for the Milanese context. The main difference in this context is given by the fact that the interviewed practitioners can concentrate on service provision being less (and often not at all) required to directly combine and administer both enabling and demanding elements of activation. Thus, the interviewed practitioners are less exposed to the dilemmas of activation in practice and this is clearly reflected also by the ways they represent and interpret their job. The interviewed practitioners in Milan put the notions of help and support at the forefront of their practice representations, too, but in this context this orientation is not perceived as being (not even potentially) at odds with what the "real" mandate of the job is. On the contrary, practitioners frame the representations of their job explicitly as a complex professional activity in which the consideration of individual situations and needs is not a personal surplus but the main starting point for a professional intervention. Accordingly, also the understandings of activation are limited to rather positive interpretations (at least as long as practitioners speak about their own job) pointing out the importance of orienting and motivating people and of providing them with information and better strategies and skills in order to enable them for autonomous job-seeking, while disciplinary aspects are not contemplated at all. However, at the same time practitioners seem to "miss" the demanding side of activation when they criticise that their positive efforts of activating people are not equally matched by clear activity requirements and by making benefit receipt more conditional (which is, however, depicted as the job of others). In this regard, practitioners in Milan seem to be quite ambivalent. While they point out the importance of working on a non-compulsory basis and of improving people's autonomy when they speak about their own job, they seem to embrace much more uncritically the ideological power of activation when they speak about the global policy framework. In this sense, they support the idea of benefits as being automatically passivity creating measures and they even call for a stronger approach to and a more stringent implementation of activation policies, often without considering what this could mean for their frontline practice if they were directly involved in bringing together enabling and demaning aspects and in administering at the same time both the "carrots" and the "sticks". In this sense, also the way frontline practitioners see and construct unemployed people seems not to have such a decisive impact on how they do their job. The findings even suggest that practitioners do share more general cultural explanations of unemployment but as they are not directly

involved in assessing people's willingness and, as a consequence, deservigness, such interpretations are not that relevant for their practice (and probably therefore also less questioned). The interesting aspects is, however, that in Milan where the interviewed practitioners are less exposed to the dilemmas of activation as they do not occur so directly in their job, practice representations are framed much more within the realm of a classical professional activity without taking into account the political significance of activation work.

The different framing of practice representations and the reference to the notion of professionalism is probably the most interesting point in the comparison of the findings obtained from the two different contexts which can make a contribution for the debate on constraints and possibilities for the professionalisation of activation work. As has been pointed out, van Berkel and van der Aa (2012) discuss whether activation should be thought of as an administrative function or rather as a professional activity. In this regard, van Berkel and van der Aa distinguish two different approaches in the existing literature. A first and rather critical approach discusses this question using social work as the professional reference model and asking whether activation policies with their strong emphasis on individual responsibilities and obligations can be in line with professional social work values and standards. This approach assumes a rather negative stance pointing out that activation work, which includes monitoring and sanctioning of unemployed people, is rather incompatible with a traditional social work repertoire. A second approach in the literature speaks of activation as a "new" profession pointing out the contradiction that "activation workers" are on the one hand increasingly expected to act in a professional way, lacking, on the other, the status „as a profession, with accredited training and qualifications, a code of conduct and registration with a regulatory body responsible for maintaining professional standards" (Sainsbury 2008: 336).

Concerning the first position it can be argued that it is indeed important to assume a skeptical stance upon activation and to critically examine whether given conditions and impositions allow to think of frontline practice in activation services as a kind of social work. However, at the same time the history of social work as a professional activity clearly shows that this profession always had to deal with the ambiguities and impositions of social policy and with highly ambiguous and political tasks of assessing individual situations and needs and negotiating conditions for public support (maybe especially in public services but, more generally, in every welfare state mediated area) and that exactly these processes of mediating between private needs and public issues and of simultaneously taking a critical stance towards policies as instrumental (*zweckrational*) action of treating and processing

people lie at the core of social work as a professional activity which has to be constantly in the making. Concerning the second position it can be argued that speaking too hastily about developing a new profession by not challenging the classical idea of professionalism and the constraints for thinking of activation work as a new professional activity might not even touch the real issues.

The question rather is, to conclude, whether and to what extent it could be possible to design activation work as a practice of citizenship and as a professional activity able to deal with ambiguities and dilemmas in a reflexive and democratic way. The findings from the Viennese case suggest a rather gloomy outlook in this respect. The interviewed practitioners do not refer to a professional realm for dealing with the difficulties of their practice and getting somehow along in the job and doing it in an acceptable manner falls completely back on the level of a personal concern and of each practitioners' very own and private business. However, being a (or probably the most) important linchpin for welfare state intervention the analysis of activation policies has to deal with the changes they imply in terms of the meaning of social citizenship which becomes restricted to those proving themselves willing to seek work. This reveals the street-level production of social citizenship in frontline practice as an important arena for welfare state intervention that in its symbolic significance goes well beyond the provision of a mere service. Thus, the question to answer will be, what kind of (professional) practice is needed and welcome in which framework of policy ideas and intentions. Is administering sticks and carrots an activity which in the long run can be squared with professional responsibility? Does the practice of activation need "activist" professionals in order to allow for a participatory dimension of practice in which public issues and private needs can be related to each other by overcoming a strict active-passive divide and by seeing welfare claiming and unemployed people still as citizens who can make their voice heard and as "active agents, capable of exercising power and affecting their own welfare and well-being" (Johansson and Hvinden 2013: 48)?

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