What activation practitioners do: An ethnomethodological study about activation as it is accomplished in practice by activation practitioners

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2015

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
Schonewille, A. (2015). What activation practitioners do: An ethnomethodological study about activation as it is accomplished in practice by activation practitioners. Ridderprint B.V.

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Download date: 16. Jun. 2021
Summary

This thesis explores the doings of Dutch activation practitioners. In this thesis activation practitioners are the work coaches and client managers who work at the UWV or Social Service\textsuperscript{22} and whose task it is to activate citizens who are unemployed and receive welfare benefits. Since the 1990’s the Netherlands introduced activating labor market policies. Part of these policies is that citizens who receive welfare benefits need to be activated. However, what the activation of citizens should entail remains vague. Laws, such as the Unemployment Benefits Act (WW) and the Work and Social Assistance Act (WWB), offer general legal frameworks and various studies show that it is not clear what activation practitioners (should) do when activating citizens (Blommesteijn, Van Geuns, Groenewoud, & Slotboom, 2012; Eikenaar, Van Groenestijn, De Rijk, & Meershoek, 2012; Polstra, 2011; RWI, 2012; Van Berkel, Van der Aa, & Van Gestel, 2010; Van der Aa, 2012).

Parallel to these vague policy goals, three disparate ‘philosophies’ regarding the way citizens can be activated can be distinguished in the literature (for example, Askheim, 2003; Clarke, 2005; Dean, 2007; Gilbert, 1998; Newman & Tonkens, 2011). First, the ‘philosophy of empowerment’. This philosophy argues that citizens should be enabled to take control over their own lives in order for them to be active participants in society. Second, the ‘philosophy of responsibilization’. This second philosophy argues that the state activates its citizens by allocating responsibilities to citizens that have to be executed by them in an appropriate manner. Citizens need to internalize the idea that it is their responsibility to be active and independent. Third, the ‘philosophy of domination’ can be distinguished. This third and final philosophy argues that activation is imposed by the state onto its citizens. In this philosophy, activation is seen as a paternalistic project. Citizens have to do what they are told to hence they have to be active. These three philosophies provide us with interesting view points on thoughts about the activation of citizens. Using Aristotle’s terminology the three philosophies provide us with ‘sophia’, which is the dedication to contemplation and translates as ‘theoretical wisdom’ (Burger, 2008, pp. 116, 119). However, each philosophy presents us with its own view and there is no agreement on what practiced activation actually entails.

\textsuperscript{22} Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen in Dutch or Employee Insurance Schemes Implementation Body in English. Sociale Dienst in Dutch.
In order to get a better picture of the practice of activation, this thesis explores the doings of fifteen Dutch activation practitioners. The selected activation practitioners were observed during their work for a combined period of 145 hours. The activation practitioners were observed during their interactions with citizens and during their interactions with each other as colleagues. In addition to these observations, formal interviews were held with eight of the observed activation practitioners and numerous informal interviews were held with all fifteen activation practitioners throughout the course of the observations. Finally, video recordings of interactions between an ‘activation entrepreneur’ (that is someone who does not work at the UWV or Social Service and who activates citizens independently) and various citizens were observed. Analysis of the generated data reveals that the observed and interviewed activation practitioners, while doing their work, do two things:

First, activation practitioners accomplish the task of activating citizens (activation practitioners’ first doing).

Second, activation practitioners accomplish the normality of their work (activation practitioners’ second doing).

With regard to activation practitioners’ first doing, this thesis shows how the observed and interviewed activation practitioners accomplish the task of activating citizens. This thesis shows that activation practitioners adopt a personal main approach when activating citizens. This main approach is most prominently and frequently used by the activation practitioner during his interactions with various citizens. Rudy and Linda (two activation practitioners who we got to know in this thesis) activate citizens in their own way. Rudy usually focuses on rules and Linda tends to focus on the desires of the citizens she faces. Furthermore, this thesis also shows that activation practitioners can revert to a variety of ‘subsidiary approaches’ when this is required by the situation. If the use of their main approach during an activation session brings about an ‘un-normal’ result, activation practitioners can apply an alternative strategy. For example, Rudy focuses less on rules when he notices that a citizen experiences difficulties (financial or emotional) and Linda offers a citizen possibilities for work when she believes that the citizen is not taking his search for work seriously. By doing so, Linda lets go of her idea that the focus of the interaction should lie on the citizen’s desires.

This diversity (activation practitioners adopt a variety of approaches) and dynamism (main approaches as well as subsidiary approaches can be adopted) in the first doing of activation practitioners can potentially bring about chaos. Activation practitioners may just ‘be doing something’, without following clear bureaucratic or professional guidelines and with no understanding of what it is that their colleagues do (Eikenaar, Van Groenestijn, De Rijk, & Meershoek, 2012; Van Berkel, Van der Aa, & Van Gestel, 2010).
However, this thesis argues that the practice of activation may be less chaotic than sometimes suggested. Activation practitioners do their work everyday, without continuously questioning if what they do themselves or what their colleagues do is correct. Following the ideas of Aristotle (350 BC), Alasdair Maclntyre (1981) and Harold Garfinkel (1967) it is possible to argue that ‘practical knowledge’ ('phronesis' in Aristotle’s (350 BC) terminology) exists in the practice of activation and that implicit guidelines are formulated on the basis of which activation practitioners do their work.

With regard to activation practitioners’ second doing, this thesis shows how activation practitioners together accomplish the normality and orderliness of their work. Inspired by Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodology, this thesis shows how activation practitioners collectively, as ‘members’ of the group, accomplish order. Ethnomethodologists are interested in the ways in which members together accomplish a normal world. A telling example is the following: when a friend, a colleague or the doctor asks how you are doing you know how to answer this question in a normal manner. No formal rules exist for answering the question ‘How are you doing?’. Nonetheless do friends, colleagues and patients, as members of the group, know how to answer this question. In this thesis it becomes clear that also activation practitioners demonstrate (via behavior and use of specific language) during their daily work that they do their work on the basis of common knowledge, and thus in the normal manner. In particular, this thesis identified seven reservoirs of common knowledge that the observed and interviewed activation practitioners demonstrate to possess.

Due to the normality and order, as it is accomplished by activation practitioners in practice, activation does not mean that anything goes. This thesis argues that activation is diverse and dynamic to a certain extent, that it is protective and that it is documented. There are differences in the ways in which activation practitioners activate citizens (first doing), however, this does not mean that activation can be anything, since in practice activation practitioners together accomplish the order (second doing) within which they activate citizens.

Thus, activation practitioners’ first and second doing results in activation that is simultaneously diverse and ordered. This thesis further argues that the diversity (citizens can be activated in various ways) may actually result in effective activation. Citizens differ from each other and they may benefit from different forms of activation (Sen, 1992). Activation in practice is not only empowering or responsibilizing or dominating. On the contrary, activation can be empowering for some citizens while at the same time being responsibilizing or dominating for others.

Furthermore, this thesis argues that, due to the ‘practical wisdom’ of activation practitioners, citizens who are activated are not the subjects of a ‘game of Russian roulette’. The orderliness of practiced activation ensures that, despite the lack of (fully)
developed bureaucratic standards and/or professional norms, activation does not mean that anything goes. In practiced activation implicit guidelines are present that are followed by activation practitioners when activating citizens.

This thesis suggests that activation may benefit from a kind of governance that seeks to balance practical wisdom of activation practitioners on the one side and the complex of societal and political interests on the other side. This type of balance may prevent policy ambitions that are too unrealistic or ‘greedy’ (Trommel, 2009). It is simply practical wisdom to protect depressed citizens form a stringent policy of ‘everybody back to work’. At the same time, it is also important that activation practitioners pay attention to societal and political expectations and guidelines. This kind of governance, where ‘practical wisdom’ and societal interests form a system of checks and balances, is called ‘joint sketching’ in this thesis.

An important element of ‘joint sketching’ is that lively interaction exists between the various actors involved. Activation practitioners will have to be able to continuously share their insights and experiences with one another, since it is only in the interaction between practitioners that the normality described in this thesis can develop. Besides this, it will also be important that there is interaction between the practice of activation and the external world. Invisibility of the practice of activation in closed office spaces is undesirable, since this provides the base for a practice that is out of tune with societal and political expectations.

Given the complexity of the task to activate citizens with their own individual preferences, problems, capabilities and needs, it may be that this ‘joint sketching’ and the reliance on ‘practical wisdom’ is a viable strategy, next to formulating bureaucratic standards or professional norms, to achieve meaningful activation. That is, activation that respects the financial and emotional boundaries of citizens and that also contributes to the social-political ambition to empower citizens, possibly (but not per se) with the politically desired increase in labor participation.