Effects of individualised follow-up on activation programme participants' self-sufficiency: A cluster-randomised study

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Abstract

Recent developments within activation policies emphasise tailor-made and individualised services; however, little is known of what the effects of these initiatives are. The aim of this study is to analyse, in a cluster-randomised design, the long-term effects of an individualised follow-up model on welfare recipients' self-sufficiency. The follow-up model systematises the work done by social workers within the qualification programme, which is a welfare-to-work programme in Norway. In the study, 18 labour and welfare offices were randomised to experimental and control groups. The data consist of baseline questionnaires for qualification programme participants (n=617) and follow-ups based on administrative data at 12, 24 and 30 months after baseline. The results show significant effects of individualised follow-up on self-sufficiency at the 30 month follow-up and strong positive trends at the 18 and 24 months follow-ups. Thus, comprehensive and individualised follow-up of participants within activation programmes seems to generate positive long-term effects on self-sufficiency.

As contemporary welfare states seek ways to increase their legitimacy, there has been a shift from passive to active labour market policies (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001). This shift implies a redefinition of the basic aims regarding social policy, from the protection of social risks, towards the implementation of measures and policies designed to help recipients become self-sufficient (Betzelt, Bothfeld & Béraud, 2011; Kildal & Nilssen, 2011; Valkenburg, 2007). Closely connected to this is the development towards the individualisation of activation policies, which means following up with welfare recipients and tailoring activation programmes to fit participants' individual needs. Important means for individualised activation are case management, individual action plans, follow-up interviews and conditionality upon participation in programmes. A central thought is that individualised activation will produce better and more effective services; nevertheless, there is a lack

of empirical knowledge related to whether and how individualised activation increases self-sufficiency among welfare recipients (Kluve, 2010).

This study evaluates the long-term effects of a training programme designed to increase social workers' ability to provide individualised follow-up of activation programme participants. More specifically, the aim is to evaluate the effects of the governmental follow-up model called the Comprehensive, Methodological and Principle-based Approach (CMPA), which was developed and implemented by the Norwegian Directorate of Labour and Welfare. Using a cluster-randomised design with baseline measurements and 18, 24 and 30 months follow-ups based on administrative data, the main question assessed is whether the CMPA programme increases welfare recipients' self-sufficiency.

The individualisation of activation policies

The individualisation of social services in general and activation services in particular can be understood by contradicting discourses, of which the citizenship-based discourse and the New Public Management (NPM) discourse are most dominant (Ferguson, 2012; Valkenburg, 2007). The citizenship-based discourse emphasises that equality is an important premise for and result of individualised services and that sufficient welfare services are a precondition for achieving an active citizenship (Duffy, 2010). Autonomy, choice and agency are important attributes for this discourse (Betzelt et al., 2011; Ferguson, 2012). The other discourse is related to NPM developments, which see individualised activation as a response to neo-liberal policy tendencies and 'third way' politics, with their focus on consumerism, efficiency, accountability and risk assessments (Howard, 2012; Valkenburg, 2007; van Berkel, 2014; van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007). The market logic of the NPM discourse also includes processes of decentralisation and deregulation, where activation policies are organised by local service providers, and service users are interpreted as consumers of these services (van Berkel & van Der Aa, 2012). However, these developments seem to have had a

number of adverse effects, such as service providers 'creaming' those who are easy to serve and 'parking' those who are more difficult to serve (Rees, Whitworth & Carter, 2014). Accordingly, the study by Brodkin (2011) demonstrated that front-line workers do not respond to increased performance-based requirements, but adjust to them in ways that policymakers did not anticipate. Examples of such adjustments were under-investing in administration, favouring speed over client needs and de-legitimising claims for help in order to decrease the workload.

Consequently, the individualisation of activation policies is a controversial issue. According to van Berkel and Valkenburg (2007), these controversies stem from the question of whether the individualisation of services should be seen as a threat to universal welfare structures or whether they are necessary in order to serve the various needs of service users within contemporary welfare states. It has also been argued that the individualisation of welfare services implies a view where social and labour market marginalisation is seen as an individual problem rather than as a societal or structural problem (Borghi & van Berkel, 2007; Howard, 2012). Nevertheless, what is often insufficiently acknowledged is the role and qualifications of the front-line workers who administrate the programmes and follow up with welfare recipients (van Berkel & van Der Aa, 2012). Research into what is important within therapy has demonstrated that 'common factors', understood as the skills of the therapist, the alliance between the therapist and the client, and the therapist's belief in the treatment, are more important than the effects of specific interventions (Messer & Wampold, 2002). Although, these findings are not fully transferable to social work or activation policies, they still emphasise the role of the professional within these follow-up processes.

The individualisation of welfare services and social work practices

According to van van Berkel (2007), the development towards individualised activation has imposed significant changes on front-line activation work. These changes include a shift from the rule-oriented to the result-oriented, from institutional compartmentalisation towards cooperation and

service integration, from provision of social benefits towards activation services, and from a culture of providing social rights towards a culture of supervising and controlling welfare recipients' behaviour. Thus, the role of the social worker has shifted from that of 'expert' to 'facilitator' (Järvinen, 2012; Meyers, Glaser & Mac Donald, 1998). As facilitators, social workers are expected to increase clients' internal motivation, support them as they define and redefine their goals, negotiate terms and guide them in their processes of change, rather than act as experts who can 'fix' their problems using standardised solutions (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007). From the clients' perspective, this development implies a shift from help to self-help, where the responsibility for finding solutions is largely placed on the individual service user rather than on the professional (Järvinen, 2012). Optimally, these changes can empower service users; however, they can also be seen as a turn away from the holistic perspective on which social work is founded (Hjörne, Juhila & van Nijnatten, 2010; Järvinen, 2012).

Professional discretion is a significant part of individualised activation (Lipsky, 1980). Professional discretion may concern the choice of a 'suitable' programme and follow-up model for the welfare recipient, the negotiation of a 'welfare contract' for the recipient, or the question of whether or not sanctions should be imposed in a given situation (Behncke, Frölich & Lechner, 2010; Fletcher, 2011; Jessen & Tufte, 2014). As Julkunen and Heikkilä (2007) argued, professional discretion tends to be stronger within needs-tested services than within rights-based services. It has also been pinpointed that individualised services would increase the power of front-line workers relative to service users; nevertheless, Howard's study (2012) demonstrated that individualised services were associated with an *absence* of power for front-line workers. The reasons were a tension between requested flexibility and hierarchy, resource deficiencies hindering individualised follow-up, and a detrimental distribution of administrative functions to the front-line office. Additionally, the study by Jacobs et al. (2013) demonstrates that assessments and planning took more time within individualised services than within standardised services. It can also be discussed whether welfare

recipients are able to bear the responsibility of their individualised activation trajectories (Valkenburg, 2007). For instance, Järvinen (2012) showed that such a perspective is especially problematic for the most vulnerable groups of welfare recipients, such as individuals with addiction problems.

The context for Norwegian social work and the CMPA programme

The Norwegian government enacted an extensive organisational welfare reform in 2006, the NAV reform. The aim of the reform was to improve Norway's welfare services based on a 'one-stop shop' principle, where social welfare, social security and employment services were integrated into a joint unit, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). According to evaluations of the reform (Askim, Fimreite, Moseley & Pedersen, 2011; Christensen, Fimreite & Lægreid, 2014), it was implemented based on NPM ideals, especially related to its consumer and quality orientation. A central thought was also that the reorganisation would make services more user-friendly. Nevertheless, there were also tensions between various professional roles, including social work, when it came to the organisation of front-line services in the merged NAV organisation (Christensen et al., 2014). With the reform, NAV workers were named 'counsellors', no matter whether they had previously worked within social services, employment services or social security. Hence, evaluations of the reform showed that a consequence of the 'one-stop shop' organisation was the loss of specialist expertise, especially related to social work, which had, prior to the merge, been an established profession within social welfare services (Alm Andreassen, 2011).

Alongside the NAV reform, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration implemented the Qualification Programme (QP) in 2007. QP is a welfare-to-work programme with a goal of decreasing poverty and marginalisation among service users that are hard to employ, especially social assistance recipients. Although employment is the preferred goal of the programme, increased mastery and/or the clarification of welfare rights are also important outcomes. QP draws on a human

resource development approach focusing on the longer-term development of participants' qualifications through participation in various courses, labour market practices, and also through physical and social training. Characteristics of the programme are that it is full-time and conditional, it can last up to two years, it is tailor-made based on an individual 'contract', and participants are closely followed up by counsellors. During the programme, participants receive a taxable income that is more generous than social assistance, the qualification benefit. Seen in the context of the NAV reform, the QP became an important arena for Norwegian social work (Alm Andreassen, 2011; Schafft & Spjelkavik, 2011)

Evaluations of the QP have demonstrated positive re-employment effects of the programme, explained by the combination of activation requirements and economic generosity (Røed, 2014). Although there were a variety of local implementations, the process evaluation of the programme identified the following common strengths: i) QP enabled tailor-made programmes due to the combination of different measures within its frame; ii) due to the qualification benefit, participants had a predictable and stable income; iii) participants were followed up over a longer period of time, including at working life or education; and iv) participants were followed up after the end of programme. Thus, the evaluation also identified some problematic aspects. Counsellors found it difficult to delegate the follow-up of participants to external service providers, and further, they found that their lack of labour-market-related knowledge was problematic and they had difficulty fulfilling the documentation requirements within the programme. There were also significant variations in the local implementation of the QP nationwide (Schafft & Spjelkavik, 2011).

To address counsellors' need for knowledge related to the follow-up work within the QP, the Norwegian Directorate of Labour and Welfare developed and implemented the Comprehensive, Methodological and Principle-based Approach (CMPA). The CMPA training consisted of a nine-day programme of four seminars over a five-month period (May 2011 - September 2011), and a three-level supervision structure supporting local implementation. The CMPA aimed to strengthen social

workers' professional skills through a number of knowledge-based methods and tools, based on, among other things, motivational interviewing (MI) and appreciative inquiry (AI). Central perspectives of the CMPA skill-training programme include placing the service user 'in the front seat', being goal focused, believing in the strength of the conversation and working with the service user to increase motivation and promote change (NAV, 2011). A more comprehensive description of the CMPA and the research design is to be found in Malmberg-Heimonen (2015).

According to the CMPA, follow-up work should cover three areas: encounters with users, system-oriented efforts and administrative work. The encounters with users focus on the relationship between the social worker and the participant and the system-oriented efforts focusing on work with collaborating partners (e.g. the participant's social network, collaborators in welfare services and the labour market); the area of administrative work includes charting, planning and coordinating services for individual participants.

In addition to the seminars, the CMPA included a three-level supervision structure. The first level was the CMPA team leaders at the local Labour and Welfare offices who supervised social workers in the Qualification Programme. The second level was the county CMPA representatives who supervised the CMPA team leaders. The third level was the resource group at the Directorate of Labour and Welfare, which supervised the county-level CMPA representatives and, if needed, representatives at other levels (Malmberg-Heimonen, 2015).

Insert Figure 1 here

The evaluation of the CMPA programme at the social worker level demonstrated positive effects on their professional competence and the quality of work supervision they received (Malmberg-Heimonen, Natland, Tøge & Hansen, 2014). Also, effects for welfare recipients have been estimated based on questionnaire data, demonstrating positive effects on part-time work and negative effects on participation in activation measures at the 18-month follow-up (Malmberg-Heimonen, 2015). Nevertheless, in this study, we will use administrative data to analyse the longer-

term effects of CMPA on self-sufficiency (i.e., employed without welfare support) when measured up to 30 months after baseline.

Methods

Fifty of the largest Labour and Welfare offices nationwide were invited by the Labour and Welfare Administration to participate in the CMPA skill-training project. The Administration informed the leaders of these offices of the requirements for participation, which included organisational readiness and participation in the research, while the researchers informed them about the cluster-randomised design. Of the 50 offices invited, 18 decided to participate, and they fulfilled the criteria for participation in the project (i.e., agreed on participation in research and, if randomised to experimental condition, participation in the CMPA programme). A common reason for not participating was that the offices had recently undergone major organisational changes. In cluster-randomised designs, groups of subjects (as opposed to individual subjects) are randomly allocated to experimental and control groups. In this study, offices instead of individual social workers or Qualification Programme participants were randomised because the skill-training programme had to be implemented at the office level, and randomising social workers or service users would have increased the risk of contamination (Campbell & Walters, 2014; Ivers et al., 2011).

Before randomising the participating offices, social workers who were working on the Qualification Programme, either full-time or part-time in addition to other tasks, received the T1 questionnaire and the consent form. After social workers had completed the first questionnaire, the 18 Labour and Welfare offices were randomly allocated to experimental or control condition by a neutral person. Nine offices were randomised to the experimental group and nine to the control group. Social workers from the experimental group offices began their skill training, while social workers from the control group offices continued with business as usual.

After randomisation, but before the local implementation through the supervision structure, they recruited participants in the Qualification Programme to take part in the study. In total, 617 Qualification Programme participants filled out the T1 questionnaire and consent form. The questionnaire assessed Qualification Programme participants' activities in the programme, unemployment and work history, their relationship with the social worker and views on the Qualification Programme. Additionally, questions on health, self-efficacy beliefs and mental health were asked.

Of Qualification Programme participants, 50.9 per cent were women and 49.1 per cent were men. The average age was 35.5 years. In terms of education, 49.8 per cent had an elementary school background or lower, 36 per cent had secondary school and 14.2 per cent had tertiary education or higher. Further, 57.9 per cent had children and 41.7 per cent were either married or cohabiting; 48.6 per cent were immigrants (born in a country other than Norway) and 64.2 per cent had employment experience while the rest had not been employed. The average amount of time spent in employment was 44.5 months. Qualification Programme participants had generally been unemployed for a total of 43.4 months during the five years prior to the T1 questionnaire. A comparison to Qualification Programme participants nationwide demonstrates that the participants in this study are similar in terms of gender, immigrant background, age and education level (Malmberg-Heimonen, Natland, Tøge, Hansen & Innvær, 2014; Ohrem Naper, 2010). This suggests that the studied sample could be in range of a representative one.

Success of randomisation

It is essential in a randomised controlled study that baseline data be similar between experimental and control groups. A comparison of participants enrolled in the experimental and control group conditions in this study showed several similarities between the groups; however, there were also some significant differences. There are more parents (p=0.023), immigrants (p=0.000) and

participants without employment experience (p=0.034) in the experimental group offices than in the control group offices. However, the data show no significant differences between Qualification Programme participants from experimental and control group offices regarding gender, age, education, employment duration and unemployment duration. As a consequence, all final analyses control for the significant differences between experimental and control group condition at T1, that is, being a parent, being an immigrant and previous employment experience (cf. Malmberg-Heimonen, 2015). A similar comparison of data at the *social worker level* revealed no significant differences between control and experimental condition on any of the measures assessed, including gender, age, education, workload, months in the Qualification Programme and previous experience with similar follow-up work (Malmberg-Heimonen, Natland, Tøge & Hansen, 2014).

Follow-up and attrition

Self-sufficiency (i.e. employed, without welfare support) was measured at 18, 24 and 30 months follow-ups and extracted from administrative data provided by the Department of Statistics at the Labour and Welfare Administration. However, this information was missing for some of the Qualification Programme participants in these data. At the 18 month follow-up, the information was missing for 13.9 per cent of participants, at the 24 month follow-up for 13.6 per cent, and at the 30-month follow-up, data were missing for 11.7 per cent of study participants. The attrition analysis was conducted on background information on experimental condition, gender, immigrant status, education, parenthood and previous employment, and was estimated for all three follow-ups (at 18, 24 and 30 months). The results demonstrate no skew attrition for the 18 and 30 month follow-ups. However, for the 24 month follow-up there was a skew attrition regarding age and previous work experience, where those covered tend to be older (p=0.008) and were more likely to have had work experience (p=0.017).

Attrition analyses of these administrative data based on experimental condition demonstrated skewed attrition regarding age and education. At the 18 month follow-up, less educated respondents tended to be lacking within the experimental group (p=0.039), while there was no such pattern within the control group. At the 24 month follow-up, younger participants were more frequently missing within the experimental group (p=0.003), while there was no such difference within the control group. This was also the case at the 30 month follow-up, where younger participants tended to be lacking within the experimental group (p=0.009). None of the other study variables demonstrated skewed attrition. Consequently, all models in the final analyses control for both education and age.

Measures

Dependent variable

Self-sufficiency was measured through administrative data at 18, 24 and 30 months after baseline as employment without receiving additional welfare support. Those who were employed and self-sufficient at the time of follow-up received '1' on the variable, and the rest of study participants received '0' on the variable.

Independent variables

Experimental condition was measured by control group (0) or experimental group (1).

Level of Education was measured by 1=less than primary school, 2=primary school, 3=secondary school, 4=bachelor's degree, 5= master's degree or higher.

Immigrant status was measured by whether the respondent was born in Norway (0) or not (1).

Parental status was measured by no children (1) or children (2).

Previous employment was measured by no (0) or yes (1) and by total months in employment (i.e. duration of employment).

Duration of unemployment was measured by total months of unemployment during the previous 5 years (prior to T1 survey).

Analysis plan

Bivariate correlations were identified for background variables (Table 1). Table 2 demonstrates the unadjusted percentages, confidence intervals and effect sizes (Cohens d) for outcome variables within the experimental and control groups. The real effects of the skill-training programme for QP participants were determined using logistic regression for outcomes on self-sufficiency (Table 3). To account for the clustered sample, this analysis reports clustered standard errors. In order to increase transparency of the findings, descriptive data on cluster-specific outcomes are also shown in Table 4. Analyses were conducted using SPSS 22.0 and Stata 13.1.

In the planning phase of the research project, a power analysis was conducted using the Guittet, Giraudeau and Ravaud (2005) model. The power analysis estimated that, with 10 clusters in each arm, 286 participants would be needed per arm. This study has nine offices in each arm, with a total of 99 social workers and 617 QP participants. The Norwegian Data Inspectorate and Norwegian Social Science Data Services (case 25275) approved the study design. We followed their recommendations and requirements throughout the study (Malmberg-Heimonen, 2015).

Results

Table 1 presents the results from the correlation analyses for baseline data, where means, standard deviations and correlations between T1 study variables are also shown. Generally, the analyses show a positive correlation between being an immigrant and a parent, a negative correlation between being an immigrant and previous employment experience, and a positive correlation between being an immigrant and age. There is also a positive correlation between education and previous employment

and between education and age. Furthermore, age and being a parent correlate strongly, while there is a less strong positive correlation between age and previous employment experience.

Insert Table 1 here

Table 2 presents unadjusted employment outcomes by experimental condition. At the 18-month follow-up, 18.8 per cent of experimental group participants were re-employed and self-sufficient, compared with 12.1 per cent among control group participants (p=0.037). At the 24-month follow-up, 24 per cent of experimental group participants were self-sufficient, while this was the case for 16.8 per cent within control conditions (p=0.046). At the 30-month follow-up, 24.4 per cent of the experimental group participants and 15 per cent of control group participants were re-employed and self-sufficient. Consequently, the differences between the groups are significant at all follow-ups. The confidence intervals (CI) and effect size measure (Cohens d) also support the conclusion in showing a small effect size for the 30-month follow-up.

Insert Table 2 here

Table 3 presents the main effects of the intervention on self-sufficiency estimated by logistic regression analyses. Standard errors are clustered on offices to correct them for random changes within the offices. Immigrant status, parental status, education level, previous employment and age are controlled for. The findings demonstrate significant effects of CMPA on self-sufficiency at the 30 month follow-up, while there were strong positive trends at the 18 and 24 months follow-ups. All analyses are adjusted for data being clustered on offices. Such adjustments affect standard errors, that is, how sure we can be that the effect is different from zero. When we accounted for clustering on social workers instead of offices, the p-values at the 24 and 30 months follow-ups increased somewhat. However, this increase was too small to make a substantial impact on our results. The effect of CMPA was at the same significance levels in all final analyses, independent of whether they were clustered on office or on social worker.

Insert Table 3 here

Although general trends in the data are not the main focus of this study, there are some interesting trends to mention (Table 3). These findings show that being an immigrant has a negative association with self-sufficiency at the 24 and 30 months follow-ups, while there were no significant associations with self-sufficiency at the 18 month follow-up. Education level has a significant positive effect on self-sufficiency at the 18 month follow-up, but there is a positive trend only at the 24 and 30 months follow-ups. Being a parent and having previous employment experience do not associate significantly with self-sufficiency at any of the follow-ups, however. Additionally, age has a negative association with all outcomes on self-sufficiency. In order to increase the transparency of our findings, Table 4 provides cluster-specific statistics of the outcomes on self-sufficiency at 18, 24 and 30 months follow-ups (Campbell & Walters, 2014). These statistics support the main conclusions of our study.

Insert Table 4 here

Discussion

Using a cluster-randomised research design with 18, 24 and 30 months follow-ups, the aim of this study was to evaluate the longer-term effects of the CMPA skill-training programme on welfare recipients' self-sufficiency. Recent activation policies emphasise individualised and tailor-made services, where helping welfare recipients become self-sufficient is a central goal. Hence, the CMPA skill-training programme had a goal of increasing social workers' skills for conducting individualised follow-ups and structuring the follow-up work into three areas: encounters with the user, system-oriented efforts and the administrative part of the work.

The main finding of the study is that the CMPA skill-training programme has a significant positive effect on welfare recipients' self-sufficiency at the 30 month follow-up and strong trends at the other follow-ups. Welfare recipients from experimental group offices, in which the CMPA programme had been implemented, are more frequently self-sufficient compared to their counterparts

from control group offices, suggesting that the CMPA skill-training programme helps social workers support participants in reaching the goal of employment.

As previously demonstrated by (Malmberg-Heimonen, Natland, Tøge & Hansen, 2014), the effects of CMPA on social workers' professional competence were significant. Qualitative data from the project have demonstrated that after taking part in the training, social workers were more conscious about the commitments they made and the goals they set in their encounters with the service users (Malmberg-Heimonen, Natland, Tøge, Hansen, et al., 2014, p. 71). When investigating effects of CPMA for the Qualification Programme participants in a shorter-term perspective, the 18 month follow-up based on questionnaire data revealed a strong positive effect on part-time work and a strong negative effect on participation in activation measures (Malmberg-Heimonen, 2015). Thus, a plausible interpretation is that the positive effect on part-time work at the 18 month follow-up explained the positive effect on self-sufficiency at the 30 month follow-up. Generally, these findings seem to indicate the importance of a professional environment when implementing activation policies: the CMPA supervision structure and the collegial support during the implementation process were important explanatory factors for the found effects.

The findings from this study demonstrate that activation programmes can, when combined with comprehensive and individualised follow-up by skilled professionals, produce positive long-term outcomes for welfare recipients' self-sufficiency. Thus, the effects seem to be dependent on the activation context in which they are implemented. Individualised services require not only flexible and responsive professionals and welfare recipients, but also flexible and responsive organisations, managers and work processes (Meyers et al., 1998). While Howard (2012) demonstrated that resource deficiencies hindered individualised follow-up, one can to some extent argue that the Qualification Programme in which CMPA was implemented builds on human resource and citizenship perspectives, which, despite the contractual and conditional characteristics of the programme, still enable a longer qualification process for welfare recipients.

Strengths and limitations

The strength of the present study is the cluster-randomised design, which enables us to estimate long-term effects of the CMPA programme on self-sufficiency. It is important to also acknowledge the limitations of the study. Only 18 offices took part; examining more offices would have improved the ability to account for the clustering effect (Campbell & Walters, 2014). Nevertheless, the reliability of these results is strengthened as they are statistically significant independent of whether standard errors are clustered on offices or social workers. Also, the cluster-specific information that was shown in Table 4 increases the reliability. Applying a three-level model would be a sophisticated method for further analyses of the impact of the clustered structure.

Another strength of this study is that the long-term follow-up of QP participants was based on administrative data. Administrative data have lower levels of attrition and enable follow-ups over time that would not otherwise have been possible. The selection of which welfare recipients to participate in the study is also an important methodological issue to acknowledge, as randomised studies often have a higher internal but lower external reliability (Campbell & Walters, 2014). Although some offices recruited more participants into the study than other offices, the reliability was increased by the fact that experimental and control group offices had similar variation in recruitment. T1 baseline data showed that the success of randomisation was satisfactory, and that the data in this study are fairly representative compared to data on participants in the QP nationwide (cf. Malmberg-Heimonen, 2015).

Acknowledgement

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