Frontline workers' competency in activation work

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Abstract

Frontline workers play a crucial role in implementing activation policies. Nevertheless, research on the competencies required for activation work is limited. We explored activation competency based on a survey of 1,735 frontline workers in the Norwegian labour and welfare administration. Factor analysis revealed two distinct underlying dimensions in activation competency: market competency and user-oriented competency. We found that the social workers in the study viewed themselves as having significantly less market competency and slightly more user-oriented competency than non-social workers have, but the differences were small. The results also indicate that these effects are partially mediated by attitudes towards conditionality. The results give reason to treat activation competencies as twofold and raise the question of whether social work education improves frontline workers' competency in activation work compared with frontline workers with other educational backgrounds.

Introduction

Throughout OECD countries, the general trend towards activation represents an increasingly important part of the modernisation of welfare states (van Berkel, de Graaf, & Sirovatka, 2012). Despite considerable variations across national models, efforts to integrate the unemployed into the labour market are a common feature of the transformed welfare states (Eichhorst. Kaufmann, Konle-Seidl, & Reinhard, 2008). The scope, intensity and design of activation policies have implications for frontline practices.

In the Norwegian case, activation practices are organised as one-stop-shops with integrated services, including social assistance, social security, employment services and various other social services (Minas, 2014). The frontline workers are given a dual role in which they act as both helpers and gatekeepers. Similar to other Scandinavian countries, Norwegian activation practices involve non-working people participating in various skill-enhancing activities to gain competitive employment.

Frontline workers have a crucial role in implementing and delivering these welfare policies (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012; Nothdurfter, 2016). Activation competency is therefore a key area of expertise and a valuable competency among frontline workers seeking to improve service delivery. The skills, competency and domain-specific self-efficacy of frontline workers require thorough scrutiny. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, the relatively sparse international research literature on implementation of active welfare policies (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012) has virtually ignored questions regarding frontline workers' competency in activation work. Hansen and Natland (2016) called for more knowledge of the impact of educational background on competency in the context of activation. In this study, we explored the underlying dimensions of activation competency and associations between frontline workers' backgrounds and these competencies.

Activation frontline workers have been described as 'professionals without a profession', and this implies a risk of unpredictable and non-transparent activation services (Van Berkel, van der Aa, & Van Gestel, 2010). The Scandinavian countries are characterised by a relatively large proportion of social workers among those who implement activation policies (Caswell & Larsen, 2017; Meeuwisse, 2009). Therefore, it seems essential that they possess the kinds of expertise required and appreciated by contemporary welfare agencies. Nevertheless, we do not know whether social workers represent a professionalisation of activation work in the sense that frontline workers with a relevant education in social work will be more competent than those without such education with respect to successful re(integration) into the labour market.

It has been reported that social workers on the front line are somewhat more sceptical of conditional support to the unemployed than other frontline workers are (Terum, Tufte, & Jessen, 2012). This finding gives reason to explore a possible mediating relationship. Social workers' less positive attitudes towards conditionality may be reflected in lower self-reported activation competency.

Frontline workers in social welfare have often been studied by using qualitative methods (van Berkel, 2017). While recognising that qualitative studies can provide valuable in-depth understanding and comprehensive descriptions, we believe that quantitative studies of this group may provide new insights. Quantitative studies are especially useful for exploring underlying dimensions, reporting prevalence and comparing groups, as we do in this article. In this study, we first explored whether activation competency consists of distinct underlying dimensions. This was done by examining the psychometric properties of the activation competency scale. Second, we asked whether the frontline social workers view their own activation competency differently from non-social workers, and if so, whether this is mediated by their attitudes towards conditionality.

Activation and conditionality as frontline work

Broadly speaking, activation policies have been analysed from two major perspectives. Whereas the workfare approach underlines the negative aspects of transformation (Jessop, 1995; Torfing, 1999), the enabling welfare state approach (Gilbert, 2004) emphasises the positive elements of these developments. This diversity of terminology stems in part from a disagreement concerning the efficiency and normative sustainability of activation policies.

Moving beyond the dispute between the charged terms of workfare and enabling welfare state, there is a widely agreed upon distinction between demanding- and enabling-oriented activating welfare states (Dean, 2003; Eichhorst, Kaufmann, & Konle-Seidl, 2008; Marchal & van Mechelen, 2013). The demanding dimension is comprised of activity requirements such as job-search criteria, mandatory participation in active labour market programmes (ALMP), sanctioning and a focus on disciplinary measures. Likewise, the enabling dimension also has mandatory elements. However, it has a clear emphasis on skill-enhancing activities to enable the unemployed to compete in the ordinary labour market. Thus, this dimension provides training courses, work skills, job counselling, psychosocial counselling and job inclusion assistance. Marchal and Van Mechelen's (2013), in line with other observers (e.g. Dean, 2003), suggested that, like those of other Nordic countries, Norwegian activation frontline work is characterised by a relatively strong emphasis on the enabling dimension in terms of various skill-enhancing activities (Hagelund, 2016), with inclusion in the labour market as the primary focus. Although activation work is mainly a mix of demanding and enabling elements (Aurich, 2011), the emphasis that is put on the enabling elements in the Norwegian context will plausibly have implications for service provision and frontline workers' attitudes and everyday practices. The enabling orientation being less harsh

and less controversial than more demanding orientations might to some extent limit the extent of negative frontline worker attitudes towards the policy.

Conditionality, which is intimately related to activation, is understood to be the receipt of monetary welfare benefits being subject to conditions regarding participation in certain work-related activities such as job seeking, job placements, school enrolments, or career counselling (Schubert & Slater, 2006). This means that if the beneficiary does not comply with the conditions set for his/her benefits, monetary support may be reduced or removed. Conditionality is a controversial topic in modern welfare policy because of the possibility of overall ineffectiveness and poverty reinforcement mechanisms (Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Sainsbury, 2017). It is plausible to assume that the attitudes of frontline workers towards activation and conditionality contribute to the shaping of service provision (Nothdurfter, 2016).

Activation competency

Competency is a common term in various research and practice fields, but it lacks a single widely agreed definition. For the sake of clarity, in the present study we understand competency to be 'the ability to perform a task with desirable outcomes' (Benner, 1982, p. 403). Thus, activation competency refers to a frontline worker's ability to (re)integrate various groups of unemployed people into the labour market and to achieve desirable outcomes.

The first step in addressing the question of activation competency consists of a clarification of what kinds of services constitute activation work. Partly due to the considerable variations across national models, the provision of such a singular and universal clarification or theoretical framework is challenging (Eichorst, Kaufmann, & Konle-Seidl, 2008). Nevertheless, some lines of thinking are traceable in the international literature. Based on a

comparative study of 5 OECD countries, Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide (2014) argued that for enabling/inclusive activation policies to succeed, it is imperative to provide both social services (e.g. assistance in carrying out daily tasks, rehabilitation programmes, psychosocial counselling) and labour-market services (e.g. supported employment, job-training). Accordingly, such coordinated service provision requires frontline competencies corresponding to both services.

Heidenreich and Aurich-Beerheide's (2014) description of a necessary twofold services provision in frontline work is reflected in Frøyland and Spjelkavik's (2012) and Spjelkavik's 2012) twofold definition of activation competency. They suggested that activation competency consists of two distinct dimensions: labour market competency and user-oriented competency. User-oriented competency is defined as a relational, motivational competency and knowledge of users' assistance needs, and relevant guidance methods. In addition, a worker must have labour market competency, which refers to knowledge about the local labour market, the means and measures by which users may be (re)integrated into the workplace and similar knowledge. There have been explicit calls for activation competency, a core area of expertise in activation work, especially in policy documents (e.g. *Et NAV med muligheter,* 2015; Ministry of Work and Inclusion, 2011–2012). However, these suggested underlying dimensions of activation competency have neither been empirically tested nor subjected to psychometric exploration to any significant degree.

Although based on a sparse literature, the twofold activation competency outlined above has also been supported by other researchers. For example, by means of an exploratory factor analysis, Corbiêre, Brouwers, Lanctôt, and Van Weeghel (2014) found that the two most essential competency dimensions for labour market inclusion are: a) relationships with employers (corresponding to labour market competency), and b) a support and client-centred approach (corresponding to user-oriented competency). Relative to the present study, the

Corbiêre et al. (2014) study suffers from low sample size (N = 158) and involves only employment specialists rather than frontline workers as activation implementers. In another recent article, Hagelund (2016) argued that the Norwegian social policy, with its emphasis on work and activation, should not focus solely on the communicative and relational aspects of competency. Rather, it should also consider how to enhance frontline workers' labour market competency. Furthermore, in a comparative study of activation work in three European countries, Nothdurfter and Olesen (2017) argued that because of the merging of employment and social welfare services in Denmark, frontline workers need both user-oriented and labour market-oriented knowledge and skills. However, neither Hagelund (2016) nor Nothdurfter and Olesen (2017) have explored the psychometric properties of the activation competency scale nor have they compared activation competency in different groups.

Frontline workers' background

Researchers have pointed out that frontline workers' educational backgrounds in welfare and benefit agencies vary across countries (e.g. van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012). For example, while social workers in Anglo-Saxon countries have little direct involvement in activation policy implementation (Millar & Austin, 2006), the Scandinavian model is characterised by an all-embracing social service with a relatively large proportion of social workers as case managers and implementers of the law and of activation policy (Meeuwisse, 2009). In the Norwegian context, social workers make up approximately a third of frontline workers in the labour and welfare administration (Terum, 2014). Job advertisement analysis show that NAV most often require higher education of three years or more (bachelor's degree) within social sciences (e.g. psychology, political sciences, sociology), social work and law. Moreover, in recent years, the increasing demand for market-oriented competency is reflected in job

advertisements (Nordhus, 2015). Given the varied background of frontline workers in activation work, it is important to determine whether the background of these frontline workers is significant for their activation competency.

Recent activation policy and the growing emphasis on the inclusion of unemployment beneficiaries into the labour market have occurred in the absence of a professional knowledge base (Hagelund, 2016; van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012). Thus, neither professional nor any other vocational education prepares students for the tasks ahead of them in active welfare administration. However, it has been argued that social workers may be the professional group with the most relevant educational background for the tasks of frontline activation work (Glemmestad, 2011; Nothdurfter, 2016).

Social workers' user-oriented competency

Among the wide range of professions, social work is considered the most values-based (Reamer, 2013). It is deeply rooted in a fundamental set of values that shapes the practitioners' priorities and professional identities (Terum & Heggen, 2016). Among the core values of the social work profession, client autonomy and service orientations are thought to be significant (Hasenfeld, 1999; Holland & Kilpatrick, 1991).

Efforts have been made to define the professional knowledge base of social work (e.g. Goldstein, 1990). In the specific context of the present study, it is useful to stress one aspect of the core competency areas of social work, namely the relational, motivational and communicative user orientation (Parton, 2006), which closely corresponds to the user-oriented competency dimension in the activation competency proposed by Frøyland and Spjelkavik (2014) and by Hagelund (2016). Thus, it may be expected that they will judge their user-oriented competency to be higher than that of their colleagues with other educational backgrounds.

Social workers' labour-market competency

The shift towards activation in the social policy seen in many countries could lead us to expect a change in the education of the frontline workers towards an emphasis on labour market competency. In other words, it may be expected that the education of social workers, recognised as the largest professional employee group among frontline workers in activation work, keeps pace with new competency requirements following social policy reforms in general, and enabling activation policy based on job inclusion in particular. However, in the case of social workers in Norway, this has not resulted in substantial changes or developments in the curriculum of social work education (Ministry of Work and Inclusion, 2011–2012).

Although some lines of thinking hold that social work might serve as a referential model for professional activation work (Nothdurfter, 2016), other scholars consider core social work values incompatible with activation work, where neoliberal ideas such as individual obligations, responsibilities and conditionality are emphasised (e.g. Hasenfeld, 1999, 2010). According to Terum et al. (2012), social workers seem to be more preoccupied with client autonomy than with self-sufficiency representing the core objective of activation work, and they have expressed more scepticism towards the work approach than other frontline workers have. Social workers are reported to have less individualistic views on the unemployed than other frontline workers do. This means that social workers less often believe that the unemployed could get jobs if they were willing to work, or that they receive benefits to which they are not entitled (Kallio, Blomberg, & Kroll, 2013). Nevertheless, advocates for social work as a referential model for activation work consider the contradictions between core social work values and emphasis on activation work as a strength for the professionalisation project of social work (Nothdurfter, 2016; Lorenz, 2006). Lorenz (2006) argued that negotiations of various considerations and tensions (e.g. private needs vs. public

issues) and a reflexive and critical stance towards policies in highly ambiguous areas is one of the primary characteristics of the social work professional activity throughout its history.

How can social workers' core values and views on conditionality affect their activation competency? According to the constructivist learning theory, 'learning is an active process in which learners are active sense-makers who seek to build coherent and organised knowledge' (Mayer, 2004, p. 14). Continuous learning requires that employees actively pursue development activities to keep themselves updated. Professional values influence types and degrees of workplace competency acquisition. In the tradition of learning theory, it is widely acknowledged that employees are not much inclined to learn skills that they cannot connect directly to their own work situation (Rosow & Zager, 1988). Thus, attitudes towards a specific domain of competency may be assumed to play a role in pursuing development activities (Billett, 2004; Metso & Kianto, 2014) and, in turn, competency acquisition. This implies that a possible negative attitude towards conditionality among social workers may weaken their activation competency compared with that of frontline workers from other educational backgrounds. In our analyses, we explored this by considering the potential mediating effect of attitudes: Can different attitudes towards conditionality explain possible differences in activation competency among social workers and other frontline workers?

Methods

Sample

The present study was designed as a cross-sectional study of frontline workers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), from which 1,735 employees (a 64% response rate) from 113 frontline offices completed a web-based survey of their attitudes towards activation/sanctioning, their self-reported activation competency, as well as their educational background and other demographic factors.

The sample consisted of 1,351 women (82%) and 302 men (18%), ranging from 23 to 70 years of age. In terms of education, 15% had a master's degree and 56% had a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification. Moreover, 483 (28%) reported a social work qualification while 1,252 (72%) reported other educational backgrounds. Among those with other educational backgrounds, the largest groups were educated in social science (28%), economy/administration (26%) or had upper secondary education (22%). We also found a substantial proportion who were educated in law (10%) or health (9%). Among those qualified as social workers, the vast majority had a bachelor's degree (93%), while 7% had a master's degree. Frontline workers from other educational backgrounds were more heterogeneous in terms of their educational levels (37% had bachelor's degrees, 19% master's, 27% higher education without a completed degree, and 17% upper secondary school education).

The present study has some methodological limitations. The cross-sectional correlational design is not well suited to inferring causal relationships between study variables. For example, in assuming a mediating role of attitudes towards conditionality, we took the view that educational background may serve as an antecedent to values and attitudes. However, it may well be that individuals with a certain set of values and attitudes are recruited for social work education, indicating that the attitudes variable should not be treated as a mediator, but rather as an independent variable. Thus, research should apply longitudinal research designs to overcome the weaknesses related to cross-sectional designs. However, our cross-sectional study may be a useful starting point for exploring in future research whether the mediating role of attitudes should be central. Moreover, our research design is well suited for answering our two main questions: Does activation competency consist of distinct underlying dimensions, and do social workers report different levels of activation competency from frontline workers from other educational backgrounds?

Measures

*Activation competency***:** Activation competency was measured by means of a six-item scale. Respondents were asked to consider the following questions and score themselves on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = to a very high degree, to 5 = not at all. To what extent have you acquired knowledge and competency in these areas in NAV: a) knowledge about the local labour market; b) knowledge about activation measures; c) competency in labour market-oriented user follow-up; d) competency in handling conflict situations with users; e) competency in communication with users, and f) competency in guiding and motivating users? Prior to calculating a mean sum score, all items were reversed so that high scores indicated high levels of competency. The items were developed in close consultation with NAV experts.

The construct validity of self-reported competency can be questioned. What do we measure when the respondents judge their own competency? Are we measuring the actual competency level or workplace-specific self-efficacy? Biases such as social desirability, lack of self-awareness, self-overestimation and self-serving bias may muddy responses and in turn the results. Alternative measures include measures of the work outcomes of the users, which can be seen as an 'objective' and countable measure. However, this measure will be skewed if the distribution of users between frontline workers is not randomised, and will not cover all aspects of the quality of the frontline work, for example respectful communication with the users. Other alternative measures include asking supervisors and/or users to judge the competency of the frontline workers. Again, one might ask if these groups will have full insight into the competency of the frontline workers, and whether other factors might influence their judgements, for example users being negative towards demands from the

frontline worker. However, judgements from supervisors and/or users could be an interesting supplement to self-judged competency in further studies.

In the present study, the responses could be interpreted in terms of work-related self-efficacy. Given that psychological research has long established the connection between self-efficacy, learning motivation and hence work-related performance (e.g. Bandura, 1977; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Mallone, 2006; Judge & Bono, 2001; Judge, Jackson, Shaw, Scott, & Rich, 2007; Staikovic & Luthans, 1998), the findings of the present article may have implications for service provision in activation work.

Regardless of how we understand self-reported competency, construct validity does not constitute a major problem because of the nature of the study aims. The primary objective of the study was not to identify levels of activation competency. Rather, the study sought to explore the underlying dimensions of activation competency and to identify any differences between the two frontline worker groups. There is no plausible reason to believe that the potential biases mentioned above are unevenly distributed between the groups.

*Conditionality***:** Attitudes towards conditionality (activation and sanctioning) were measured by two items ('Demands and sanctioning etc. should be central activation measures for NAV'; 'Conditions and sanctions etc. are effective means of getting people into work'), measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). These two items were highly correlated ($r = .60\ p < .01$).

Control variables: Gender was coded as 0 for men and 1 for women. Age was coded as 23 years = 0, 24 years = 1, etc. Educational level was coded as 0 = upper secondary, 1 = higher education. We also tested alternative models to check for non-linear effects of age and for

interactions (age^2, age*educational background and gender*educational background), but none of these proved to be significant.

Methodological procedures

The factorability of the data was assessed by means of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (Kaiser, 1974) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954). Psychometric evaluation of the Job Inclusion Competencies scale was conducted by means of an internal consistency analysis (Cronbach's α) and factor analysis (principal components analysis; PCA) in conjunction with a parallel analysis. Furthermore, scree plots were analysed as a contribution to the correct extraction of factors. It was assumed that satisfactory internal consistency requires alpha values of at least 0.7 (DeVellis, 2006). According to the convention, mean inter-item correlations should be above 0.20 (Briggs & Cheek, 1986). A satisfactory factor solution had to meet four criteria. First, the solution had to explain at least 50% of the total variance in the data. Second, each factor had to contribute at least 10% of the total variance explained. Third, all included factors must yield eigenvalues above 1.0. Finally, the solution must have a simple structure in terms of all items loading substantially on only one factor (Thurstone, 1947).

T-tests were conducted to explore the difference between social workers and non-social workers, as shown in Figure 1. In accordance with Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step procedure, a multiple hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with variables displaying significant bivariate associations to control for background variables and to investigate whether the impacts of educational background on activation competency were completely or partially mediated by attitudes towards conditionality. In other words, mediation analyses were applied to explore whether the impact of educational background (the independent variable) on market competency and user-oriented competency (dependent

variables) could be explained by the degree to which the employees favoured the use of mandatory activation and sanctions (the mediator variable).

Ethics

In the present study, respondents were informed about the study's aim and confidentiality and that their participation was voluntary. The data were collected in accordance with the guidelines of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Results

Two dimensions of activation competency

Our first question was whether activation competency consists of separate underlying dimensions. We explored this question using PCA. The first step was then to check whether the data were suitable for PCA. The activation competency scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). Prior to the PCA, the factorability of the data was assessed. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) showed a value of 0.78. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was highly significant ($p < .001$). Moreover, inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of several coefficients stronger than .3. All of this implies that the data were suitable for factor analyses.

The next step was to perform the factor analyses to see whether it revealed clear factors that represented distinct underlying dimensions in activation competency. The results of a PCA are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Factor structure for activation competency

	Variable (item)	Factor 1(user competency)	Factor 2(marked competency)	Communality
1	(communication)	**0.92**	-0.01	0.83
2	(conflict)	**0.87**	-0.05	0.73
3	(Guidance)	**0.86**	0.09	0.81
4	(active measures)	-0.04	**0.91**	0.81
5	(local labour marked)	-0.06	**0.87**	0.73
6	(labor marked oriented-user-follow-up)	0.15	**0.81**	0.77
	Eigenvalue (λ)	3.27	1.41	
	Explained variance	54.50%	23.44%	
	Total variance explained	**77.94 %**		
	Cronbachs α	0.86	0.84	

Note. Factor structure based on exploratory principal component analysis with direct oblimin rotation.

Two components exceeded an eigenvalue of 1 ($F_1 = 3.27$, $F_2 = 1.41$), explaining

77.94% of the total variance. Each of these factors explained more than 10% of the variance ($F_1 = 54.50\%$, $F_2 = 23.44$). As shown in Figure 2, the scree plot revealed a clear break after the second component. Furthermore, the parallel analysis supported the extraction of two components. Thus, in line with conventional extraction methods, the two-factor solution seems reasonable. Moreover, none of the variables loaded substantially to more than one factor, resulting in a simple factor structure.

Substantially, the PCA revealed a pattern of two distinct sub-dimensions in activation competency. We interpreted the first factor to be user-oriented competency. This factor consists of knowledge on communication with users, handling conflictual situations with users and guiding and motivating users. The second factor was interpreted as market competency, and included competency in activation measures, knowledge about the local labour market and market-oriented user follow-up (a focus on [re]integration into the labour market in every step of the follow-up). This two-factor solution, corresponding to a market competency subscale and a user-oriented competency subscale, is consistent with the twofold

theoretical conceptualisation of activation competency (Corbière et al., 2014; Frøyland &

Spjelkavik, 2014; Hagelund, 2016).

Do social workers differ from other frontline workers?

Figure 1 displays mean scores on market competency, user-oriented competency, and

attitudes on conditionality of the two groups: educated social workers and frontline workers

from other educational backgrounds.

**Figure 1: Differences in mean scores between social workers and other frontline workers
on market competency, user-oriented competency and attitudes on conditionality** N =
1735
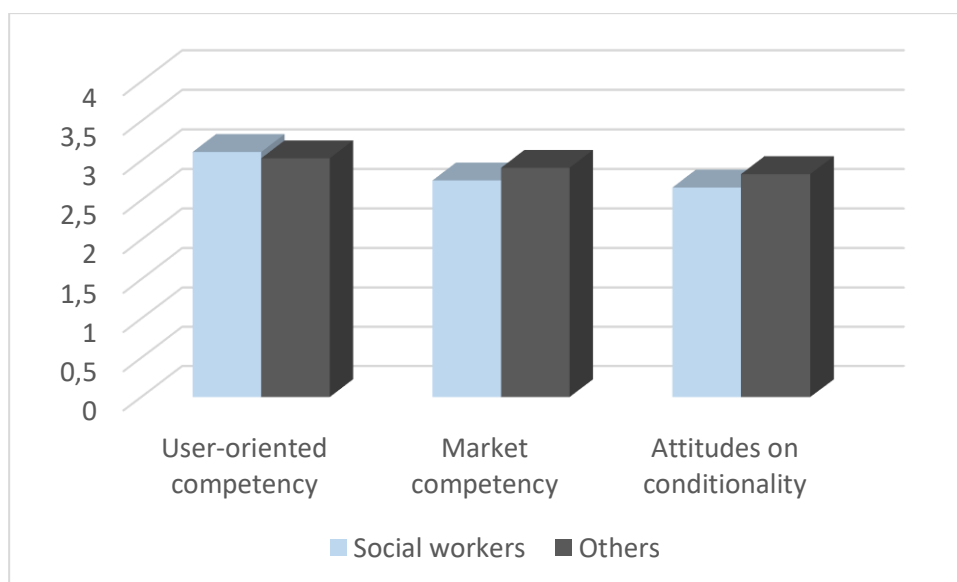
Generally, we found relatively small differences between social workers and other

frontline workers. Both groups scored themselves relatively highly on both user-oriented and

market competency, and both groups were quite positive towards conditionality. However, we

did note that social workers scored somewhat lower on market competency, and the

difference was significant (2.7 versus 2.9, *p* < .001). Social workers were also significantly

less positive towards conditionality than were frontline workers from other backgrounds (2.6

versus 2.8, *p* < .001). We found no significant difference between social workers and other

frontline workers in their self-reported user-oriented competency. Although social workers

scored slightly higher (3.1 vs. 3.0), the difference was small and insignificant ($p = .20$).[1]

Can different attitudes towards conditionality explain differences in activation competency?

The impact of educational background on perceived activation competency may be partially

or fully mediated through the pathway of attitudes towards conditionality. To explore this, we

conducted a multivariate regression analysis; attitudes towards conditionality are included in

Model 2.

**Table 2. Self-reported user oriented competency dependent on frontline workers'
educational background**

	Model 1	Model 2
	B (std.error)	*B (std.error)*
Ed. background (0=non soc. worker)	0.11* (0.05)	0.12* (0.05)
Gender ((0=male)	0.23* (0.05)	0.23* (0.05)
Age (0=23 years)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Educational level (0=upper secondary)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Attitudes towards conditionality		-0.09* (0.03)
Constant	3.24* (0.07)	3.34* (0.08)
Adjusted r^2	0.02	0.02
N	1 418	1 394

* $p < .05$

    Table 2 confirms the impression gained from Figure 1, that the difference between the

self-reported user-oriented competency of social workers and that of non-social workers is

relatively small. Social workers scored slightly higher (0.11 on a scale from 0 to 4), and the

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[1] A closer inspection of the standard deviations revealed that the dispersion on these three questions was

essentially equal in the two groups (SD between 0.7 and 0.8).

difference increased marginally in Model 2, when the mediator variable, attitudes towards conditionality, was included. This means that that a slight suppressor effect is at play. However, a Sobel's test indicates that the indirect effect was not significant. The difference in competency between social workers and non-social workers is mediated by their attitudes on conditionality to a very limited degree.

Table 2 also tells us that those who are positive towards conditionality tend to see themselves as more competent. A frontline worker who has a very positive view of conditionality was predicted to score 0.36 points higher on the user-oriented competency scale than is a frontline worker with a very negative view. In addition, we noted that female frontline workers reported significantly more user-oriented competency, but the differences were relatively small (0.23).[2] Age and educational level did not seem to influence frontline workers' self-reported user-oriented competency.

Table 3. Self-reported market competency dependent on frontline workers' educational background

	Model 1	Model 2
	B (std.error)	B (std.error)
Ed. background (0=non soc. worker)	-0.20* (0.05)	-0.18* (0.05)
Gender ((0=male)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Age (0=23 years)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Educational level (0=upper secondary)	0.08* (0.03)	0.09* (0.03)
Attitudes towards conditionality		-0.09* (0.03)
Constant	2.83* (0.07)	2.94* (0.07)
Adjusted r^2	0.01	0.02
N	1 422	1 397

* $p < .05$

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[2] Additional analyses (not shown) reveal that experience does not explain this: women and older frontline workers also score significantly higher when we control for work experience.

Table 3 shows that social workers judged their own market competency to be somewhat below that of frontline workers from other educational backgrounds. The difference wss significant, although quite small (0.20 on a scale from 0 to 4). The difference was only slightly smaller in Model 2 (0.18). This implies that the effect was mediated by attitudes towards conditionality to a limited degree.[3] Nevertheless, Sobel's test indicated that the indirect effect of educational background on market competency via conditionality was statistically significant ($p < .05$). The effect of educational background on competency was reduced in Model 2, yet still significant and non-zero. This indicates that the mediation was partial. Although all effect sizes were small, it indicates that education in social work equips frontline workers with slightly more negative attitudes to conditionality than frontline workers from other educational backgrounds, and this in turn is associated with lower degrees of perceived market competency.

We also noted the small and insignificant effect of gender and age, which implies that frontline workers of both genders and all ages have similar impressions of their own market competency. Frontline workers with higher education reported slightly higher market competency than did frontline workers with only upper secondary education, but the difference was small (about 0.08). Again, we found that frontline workers with a positive view of conditionality judged their own competency to be somewhat higher. A frontline worker with a very positive view of conditionality was predicted to score 0.36 higher on market competency, in comparison with one who took a very negative view.

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[3] To see changes in similarity between social workers and other frontline workers after they gained relevant work experience, we also tested models with interaction terms (e.g. work experience*educational background). These interaction terms were not significant, which means that the difference between social workers and other frontline workers is the same for experienced and inexperienced workers.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal two distinct underlying dimensions in activation competency: market competency and user-oriented competency. This tells us that activation competency should not be viewed as a one-dimensional factor. Activation competency consists of both market knowledge (e.g. knowledge of the local labour market and activation measures) and knowledge about users (e.g. how to communicate with users and handle conflict). User-oriented competency is closely related to one of the core competency areas of social work suggested by Parton (2006): the relational, motivational and communicative user orientation. The two dimensions of activation competency confirmed in the PCA was consistent with Frøyland and Spjelkavik's (2014) theoretical twofold definition of the concept of activation competency. This implies that one should consider the two distinct dimensions of activation competency when further exploring its importance.

The overall findings suggest more similarities than differences between social workers and non-social workers on these two factors. More specifically, the results indicate that social workers tend to score themselves somewhat higher than their non-social worker counterparts on user-oriented competency, but the difference is small. This small difference appears to be rather counterintuitive, given that social workers are considered well trained in relational, motivational and client-oriented work. Indeed, one should not rule out the possibility that the most competent workers are also more critical of their own competency and thus tend to underestimate it. Although self-reports are in no way an objective assessment of competency (see the discussion in the Methods section), there are few reasons to expect that possible biases will be unevenly distributed between social workers and non-social workers. Self-reported competency may reflect the work-specific self-efficacy of frontline workers, thus raising the question of why social workers display less self-efficacy than expected.

The social workers in the study scored somewhat lower than non-social workers on market competency. This relationship was to a limited degree mediated by attitudes towards conditionality. Although social workers were found to be somewhat less positive in their views of conditionality than non-social workers, both groups are quite positive, and the different attitudes do not seem to explain much of the difference in self-reported competency.

How can we explain the relatively small differences in competency between educated social workers and frontline workers from other educational backgrounds? One explanation could be rooted in the relatively wide recruitment strategy of NAV − frontline workers from many backgrounds have been recruited. Thus, extensive efforts have been made to provide all employees with a common competency platform. Moreover, the findings of the present study may also be considered consistent with research findings and theories stating that the most important qualification and competency acquisition occurs in the workplace rather than in the educational setting (Collins, 1979; Eraut, 2010).

Thus, findings suggesting similarities between professional groups were as expected. However, given the extensive elaboration and focus on the relational aspects and working relationships between social workers and service users in social work educational curricula, one could expect higher degrees of self-reported user-oriented competency among social workers. Therefore, the finding of no substantial differences between the two groups in this regard might appear to be somewhat counterintuitive.

Several researchers have argued that user-oriented competency is relatively safeguarded, and simultaneously stressed the need for higher market competency among frontline workers in labour and welfare administration (e.g. Frøyland & Spjelkavik, 2014; Hagelund, 2016). The results of the present study support this view, because employees scored themselves somewhat higher on the user-oriented competency subscale than on the market competency sub-scale.

In his assertion that social work could serve as a referential model for professionalisation of activation frontline work, Nothdurfter (2016) argued that such a professionalisation project should be based on a critical and reflexive understanding of how to find the right balance between employment-oriented goals and the delivery of social services. In line with the findings of Hagelund's study, the results of the present study show that social workers still have a way to go with respect to finding the right balance, as their self-reports indicated that they are more confident about user-oriented competency than market-oriented competency.

Social workers in the study perceived themselves to be less labour market competent than non-social workers did, although the difference was relatively small. The mediating role of attitudes towards conditionality seems to be a plausible explanation for this; non-social workers could have more positive views of conditionality, and hence develop better competency. Billett (2004) introduced the concept of co-participation, which refers to the efforts made by workplaces to enhance learning, on the one hand, and the employees' choice of how to engage in learning activities, on the other. A workplace may provide learning opportunities in a constructive manner; however, this may not be sufficient if the employees do not engage purposefully in the learning activities (Billett, 2004). The principles of the constructivist learning theory imply that employees are less inclined to learn new skills that they cannot directly connect to their work (Rosow & Zager, 1988) or which contradict their own values and attitudes (Billett, 2004). Hence, one might assume that social workers do not acquire market competency to the same extent that non-social workers do because of their relatively negative attitudes towards conditionality, in line with the core values related to social work ideology. However, this explanation found rather weak support in the empirical results which showed that attitudes mediated the effect of educational background only to a limited degree. The small effect sizes yielded by the present study may be attributable to the

emphasis on the enabling dimensions in the Norwegian activation context, which contradicts the core values of social work to a lesser extent than do activation regimes with stronger emphasis on demanding dimensions characterised by client treatment that is more strongly repressive.

Implications

The work of frontline workers neither can nor should be controlled in every detail by guidelines from above (Caswell, Kupka, Larsen, & van Berkel, 2017). The necessary room for discretion means that frontline workers are not only policy implementers, but also active policy makers who shape the way in which policies are put into practice. Because full control of frontline workers is not an option, it is important to consider carefully who we employ as frontline workers, which competency they possess and how their education and background affect their competency.

Our results suggest that it may be important to treat market competency as an important aspect of activation competency, distinguished from user-oriented competency, although in an integrative manner[4] (Frøyland & Spjelkavik, 2014). Developing the market competency of frontline workers may be especially important for a successful implementation of activation policies, and market competency has been singled out as the competency area most in need of improvement (Hagelund, 2016).

A professionalisation of activation work has been called for to improve such work (Van Berkel, van der Aa & van Gestel, 2010). The central question arising from the present article is whether social work has an adequate foundation and the necessary preconditions to form the basis for developing an activation profession, and from a normative standpoint

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[4] Frøyland and Spjelkavik (2014) stressed the importance of frontline workers possessing both user-oriented and labour market-oriented competency to succeed in the labour market integration of the unemployed.

whether it should move in such a direction. Another equally interesting question is whether activation work, with its inherent monitoring and sanctioning aspects, is consistent with professional work.

When the goal is a sustainable future for the social work profession, in light of the present activation policies the direction of the development of curricula and knowledge base of social work education should be decided on in close consultation between academia, policy makers, the labour and welfare administration and unions. Several researchers have advocated for a greater focus on evidence-based practice in social work. Gray and Schubert (2012) argued that there is a vast time lag between knowledge production and transfer or translation of knowledge. Survey data reveal that a shrinking proportion of NAV employees have backgrounds in social work (Terum, Øverbye, & Torsvik, 2014). This tendency to employ frontline workers from educational backgrounds other than social work has also been found in Denmark (Caswell & Larsen, 2017). Although the reasons for this fact have not yet been empirically scrutinised, from the perspective of a professionalisation project there may be causes for concern.

For the sake of the sustainability of social work in an increasingly neoliberal practice environment, and with ever wider use of New Public Management instruments in managing activation work (van Berkel, 2010), it seems pivotal to prove the ongoing utility of the profession. However, this might represent a challenging tension and balance of identity development for the social work profession. As McDonald and Reicsh (2008, p. 57) pointed out, social workers have to constantly deal with the 'contradictions between their self-proclaimed ethical imperative to work for social justice and their need for elite support to preserve their tenuous occupational status'. Social work education is designed to qualify students for frontline social work. Nevertheless, the results of this study call into question whether a social work education increases students' activation competency, compared with

the alternative backgrounds of frontline workers. How the competency of frontline workers can be further improved should be explored in future research.

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