



Frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of behavioural conditionality

Talieh Sadeghi  | Lars Inge Terum

Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

Correspondence

Talieh Sadeghi, Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway.
Email: talieh.sadeghi@oslomet.no

Abstract

The debate on behavioural conditionality is characterised by abundant controversies. Frontline managers have a particularly important role in implementing these policies because their interpretation of the welfare policies regulates the frameworks of street-level bureaucrat's discretionary powers. A nationwide survey among frontline managers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration revealed that 86% of the managers expressed strong normative support towards welfare conditionality. With this as a backdrop, this paper develops a better understanding of managers' perceptions and justifications of the Norwegian type of behavioural conditionality. Analysis of focus group interview data showed that the managers adopted a broad definition of conditionality, meaning promotion of an overall (re)integration of the client into the society as opposed to the narrow definition focusing solely on labour market integration. Furthermore, the implementation of welfare conditionality primarily was perceived as mild and client sensitive. The managers mainly justified welfare conditionality in terms of care and paternalistic defences, arguing that requirement of work and activities are in the client's best interest, understood in terms of social democratic values.

KEYWORDS

behavioural conditionality, frontline managers, justifications, paternalism

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Throughout Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, activation policies, understood as a set of measures designed to integrate jobless people into the labour market (Dingeldey, 2007; Eichhorst, Kaufmann, Konle-Seidl, & Reinhard, 2008), have become increasingly widespread and applicable to a growing number of target groups and benefit areas. Behavioural conditionality, being one such measure, is the requirements of ongoing behavioural compliance for welfare benefit receipt. Within the Norwegian social assistance scheme, this means mandatory participation in a wide range of activity measures, such as job-search centres, work-related activity centres, and various training programmes (Sadeghi & Terum, 2019).

Despite gross cross-national variations in the global north, conditionality has sparked ample research and debate characterised by abundant controversies. In particular, the justificatory and moral foundations of conditionality have been subject to heated debate. It has been argued that given the coercive quality of conditionality and, thus, challenges posed to notions of liberty, it requires thorough and robust justification (Kane & Köhler-Olsen, 2015; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Frontline managers have an important role in the implementation of behavioural conditionality policies because their interpretation of the welfare policies shape the organisational culture and regulate the frameworks of street-level bureaucrat's discretionary powers. Street-level management as an organisational authority operates as a mediator between rule-making politicians and de facto policy making street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). The degree of resistance of street-level bureaucrats towards policy objectives is partly contingent upon the subjective experience of legitimacy of the manager's orientations and justifications. Hence, how these managers perceive, interpret, and justify welfare policies have arguably major implications for frontline practices. In a similar vein, it has been argued that organisations and management matter in shaping street-level behaviour (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015).

A nationwide survey among frontline managers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NLWA) showed that 86% of the respondents expressed strong normative support towards behavioural conditionality.¹ Furthermore, the same survey revealed that only 54% of the managers believed that conditionality is an efficient means of getting people into work.² Given the controversies surrounding conditionality, explanations as to why the frontline managers endorse and justify conditionality remain unclear. How can we understand the statistical gap between those who normatively support conditionality and those who believe it is an efficient means of getting people into work? Motivated by this, the purpose of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the frontline manager's perceptions and justification of conditionality.

The NLWA constitutes an interesting case in this regard for several reasons. The administration is organised as a multipurpose one-stop shop with a breadth of tasks and large local autonomy (Minas, 2014). The staff, which administer the social assistance scheme, are highly professionalised with trained social workers as the largest profession (Terum, Torsvik, & Øverbye, 2017). Even among the frontline managers, a third are educated as social workers.

Traditionally, the ethic of social work has been interpreted as in tension with the ideas underpinning conditionality (Hasenfeld, 1999; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018; Terum, Tufte, & Jessen, 2012). Nevertheless, by virtue of being frontline managers, it is also likely that they will tend to be oriented towards results related to policy objectives (Lipsky, 2010). Thus, they might be caught by a tension drawing in diametrically different directions (Evans, 2010). In addition, many NLWA offices are small, which means that the managers are also in daily face-to-face interaction with clients and perform the same street-level mandatory activation work as other frontline workers.³ This organisational arrangement may have an augmenting effect on the aforementioned tension.

The principal aim of this paper is to investigate frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of conditionality. In addition, as justificatory defences of a given policy are mainly based on perceptions of the same policy, we will also address the question of how our informants conceptualise the context-specific conditionality.

Despite ample research attention directed towards welfare reform, rather few studies have examined frontline attitudes and justifications of conditionality. Also, these studies primarily concentrate on frontline workers, rather than managers, as is the case in our study. Furthermore, whereas studies of frontline responses have tended to be

dominated by anglo-sphere countries underpinned by neoliberal market oriented alignment, such as the US and the UK, the study at hand provides another, distinctive take on the issue, namely, a Norwegian frontline perspective, a context rooted in social democratic values, and to a nontrivial extent staffed with social workers.

2 | BEHAVIOURAL CONDITIONALITY

2.1 | Definitions

Justifications of a certain policy rely on how that policy is defined, interpreted, and organised. According to Øverbye (2000), there are roughly two ways to conceptualise conditionality. "Labour market activation" refers to integration of the unemployed into the labour market, whereas "social activation" is a broader concept aimed at bringing socially isolated people into different types of social communities. In a similar vein, Sabatinelli (2010) distinguishes between the narrow interpretation referring to disciplinary approaches with a unilateral focus on transition towards the labour market; in contrast, a broad definition of conditionality adopts a more multilateral focus in which the goal is to promote an overall (re)integration of the client into society. Integration into the labour market would often be viewed as one of several substantial forms of integration, and the aim here is to enhance the quality of the client's life. In a Belgium context, it was found that depending of a number of organisational factors, frontline workers differ in their interpretations of conditionality policies (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012). Those adopting a narrow definition adhere to a more disciplinary approach with their clients and develop a fatalistic view about their jobs. On the contrary, frontline workers with a broad definition of conditionality show a more tailor-made approach, and they perceive the aim of their work to be empowering their clients (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012).

Adoption of a broad approach to conditionality will presumably cultivate a holistic and client-centred orientation that in turn may influence frontline justifications of the policy.

2.2 | Design

Because of the major variations across national models with regards to the design and facility of conditionality throughout OECD countries (Eichhorst et al., 2008), it has been argued that each form of conditionality should be explored on its own merits in a context-specific manner (Geiger, 2017; Grant, 2011; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). This has major implications for the exploration of justificatory narratives. The central question in this regard is what is there to justify?

Notwithstanding substantial cross-national variations, Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018) have proposed three common defining features of behavioural conditionality, namely, behavioural requirements, monitoring, and sanctions. Although multifaceted, these components can be understood as continuums where the opposite poles represent harsh and onerous regimes on the one extremity, and human-capital oriented, mild, and client-sensitive regimes on the other (Langenbucher, 2015).

Behavioural requirements, or rather activity requirements, can be mild in the sense that they consist of elements of human capital enhancement such as formal education or courses, usually called enabling activities. On the other end of the scale are more demanding activities such as long-hour days of mandatory work activities in return for welfare benefits.

Monitoring and verification processes are indispensable features of conditionality. These processes vary substantially among national models. For example, who are the actors involved in the monitoring? In professionalised frontline organisations, granted high levels of discretionary powers, it is assumed that monitoring is less likely to be subject to strict regulation and performance-management processes in comparison with nations relying on bureaucratic organisations staffed with nonprofessionals (Terum, Torsvik, & Øverbye, 2018).

Variations in sanctioning regimes, that is, the scope and duration of sanctions are perhaps the most prominent difference between national models. In a recent comparative study of social assistance, Eleveld (2017) explored the strictness of sanctions in 25 European countries. At the intersection between monitoring and sanctioning, the existence of so-called mitigation clauses, assumed to contribute to the reasonableness and consistency of the system, were compared across the countries. Eleveld distinguishes between discretionary clause (discretionary capacities to the frontline in decisions regarding sanctions), good reason clause (if the client has a good reason for violation of requirement, sanctions will not be imposed), reparatory clause (benefit will be restored as soon as the client resumes the behavioural requirements), and hardship clause (clients may apply for some allowances to buy essential goods, such as food, after a sanction has been imposed), and finds that countries vary significantly in their legal and institutional framing with regards to these mitigation clauses.

The results from Eleveld's study revealed that Norway, in addition to being low on sanctioning strictness, is one of a few countries adopting all four mitigation clauses and thus scoring low on a sanction indicator, suggesting that an immediate risk of violating the fundamental right to minimum means of subsistence enshrined in various international treaties (e.g., European Consortium for Sociological Research) does not exist.

2.3 | Frontline responses to welfare reform: Attitudes towards and justifications of behavioural conditionality

The few studies investigating frontline responses to welfare conditionality across Western European countries and US reveal in general positive attitudes (Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco, & Ketch, 2009; Handler, 2004). However, the policy of compulsion in welfare reform is often justified by workers only if decent and meaningful activity measures are offered (Finn & Blackmore, 2001). Further, the forcible and punitive nature of conditionality and sanctioning regimes are found to be underrecognised by a variety of mechanism. For example, as Morgen, Acker, and Weight (2010) have demonstrated, frontline staff replace negatively laden terms such as "sanction" with the term "disqualification" in order to provide a discursively more positive framing of welfare reform as a constructive tool to foster client accountability and get the clients "back on track" (p. 62). In effect, frontline testimonies are characterised by rather few moral anguish in response to punitive and disciplinary welfare reforms.

A range of various justifications have been found to prevail among both workers and managers in the frontlines (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015; Handler, 2004; Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010). For example, in a study of frontline attitudes in an American context (Oregon) with severe "full family sanctions," it was revealed that workers and agency leaders articulated paternalistic⁴ justifications for sanctions, as constructive means to re-engage clients in welfare-to-work practices for their own good (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010). Sanctions were viewed as a necessary tool to promote individual responsibility, empowerment, independence, and quality of life for the clients. Further, sanctions were not considered a punishment but rather a key tool to get "the client's attention" and as such a gentle nudge.

As welfare reform can be supported by multiple rationales (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011), workers may also embrace different kinds of justificatory stories. Thus, in addition to paternalistic justifications, caseload reduction has been a main reason for many workers to embrace welfare reform (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010). Also, arguments of fairness and fraud reduction have been used to justify the coercive nature of welfare conditionality in several studies (Morgen, Acker, & Weight, 2010; Handler, 2004).

2.4 | Drivers for Norwegian welfare conditionality

Being rooted in the Nordic model with emphasis on the human capital approach, the ideational drivers for Norwegian conditionality differ from that of the Anglo-sphere and continental countries. However, there are also some

similarities in drivers across national models. According to Lødemel and Trickey (2001), an important driver for conditionality in the Nordic countries has been to prevent social exclusion. Instead of emphasising individual and cultural factors as causes for worklessness, the Nordic countries tend to stress structural causes of worklessness, such as industrial restructuring resulting in skills mismatch between available labour supply and existing demands. According to this view, labour market integration is not just a matter of individual responsibility. Rather, it is assumed that greater emphasis on individual responsibility should be accompanied by a focus on developing better services and offering a wide range of training measures (Hernes, Heum, & Haavorsen, 2010).

By means of thorough analysis of Norwegian legislative documents, Eriksen and Molander have identified a specific fourfold justificatory set, that is, a repertoire of distinct arguments in favour of compulsory activation. Economic efficiency arguments refer to cost reductions and public savings potentially gained by implementing conditionality. Within the justice argument, conditionality is perceived as a tool for “balancing the rights and duties of claimants” and notions of fairness. Further, popular support arguments denote to the intention of increasing the legitimacy of welfare institutions. Finally, the care argument emphasises the need to make demands on people because passivity is viewed as harmful, whereas work and activities are believed to be central for health and well-being. Making demands on people is regarded as “taking them seriously and treating them with respect.” When participation in activation programmes is made mandatory, this argument clearly resembles a paternalistic stance, holding that forcing people into compulsory activities can be defended because it is in the individual's own interest. In Eriksen and Molander's study, interviewed Norwegian politicians mainly articulated paternalistic justificatory narratives.

The paternalistic argument in the Norwegian public discourse is evidently different from that of Mead's moral judgementalism (Wright, 2012). Care, respect, and health concerns, being paramount components in the Norwegian rhetoric, are virtually absent in Mead's reasoning (1997). Furthermore, in the Norwegian discourse, harsh benefit sanctions are assumed to have a limited effect on people's willingness to work.

2.5 | Legal and institutional context

In Norway, social assistance is regulated in the “Social Services Act.” The practical implementation though, is a local responsibility delegated to the municipalities and is in general characterised by a high degree of discretionary powers granted to the municipal street-level organisations mainly staffed by trained social workers.⁵ As of 2017, an amendment (§20a) was added to the act that instructs the municipalities to set conditions for social assistance benefits for all claimants under the age of 30.

The wording in the former Social Services Act (§20) regarding conditionality was:

It can be made demands for granting financial benefits, including that the beneficiary during the benefit period shall perform appropriate tasks in the municipality of residence.

The wording in the new amendment (§20a) instructs municipalities to set conditions for social assistance benefits for all claimants under the age of 30:

It shall be made activity requirements for granting financial benefits to persons under the age of 30, unless weighty reasons speak against it.

As implied in the circular, whereas the former act imposed nonconditionality as the main rule, the recent act inculcates conditionality as the main rule. However, this alteration is mitigated by the wording “unless weighty reasons speak against it,” indicating maintenance of reduced, however, substantial they may still be, discretionary capacities for implementers.

Notwithstanding the alteration of the legislation regarding behavioural requirements, the sanctioning section containing the “can” clause is unmodified, noting that:

In case of violation of behavioural requirements, a decision can be made to reduce benefits, provided that the decision letter regarding benefits mentions the possibility of such reduction.

Several requirements must be met before the municipality can impose a sanction. First, the act requires that the reduction of monetary benefit follows a proportionality principle, and there is a requirement for all reductions that the benefit is not reduced below a decent minimum level. The social assistant recipient must be notified of a possible reduction in the original individual decision letter. Moreover, prior to the imposition of a sanction the municipality must make an assessment on whether the violation is a result of the client's lack of will or ability. In addition, the act instructs an even milder treatment of claimants with caring responsibilities for children and, as such, attempts to mitigate potential harm to third parties. In all cases sanction impositions, the clients are always entitled to have their basic needs covered, and thus, only a minor fraction of the monetary benefit may be reduced.

3 | METHODS

The study reported here is part of a larger project involving a quantitative survey of 1,700 frontline workers in 108 NLWA offices and several qualitative focus group interviews.⁶ This study is based on focus group interviews with frontline managers in seven NWLA offices from two major regions of Norway. Focus group interviews are an appropriate method of identifying attitudes, frameworks of understanding and facilitating the expression of ideas through debate within the group (Kitzinger, 1995).

By means of our quantitative survey data from 108 offices, we were able to identify the size of the welfare offices, as well as the extent they practiced conditional cash transfers. The seven offices we strategically selected for the present study were relatively sizable and had previously in their survey response reported substantial experience in conditional cash transfers, as we believed these offices are better able to address our questions regarding attitudes and justifications of welfare conditionality. In all offices, all relevant managers were interviewed. The focus groups consisted of two to three participants, resulting in a total of 17 informants (nine women and eight men). Most of the informants (15 out of 17) were either head of the unit or head of a department in the organisation. Several of the frontline managers also reported that they had face-to-face interactions with clients. Ten of the informants were educated social workers, whereas the rest had various educational backgrounds such as teachers, journalists, and economists.

The interviews were semistructured. Informants were asked a series of open-ended questions on their perceptions, attitudes, and justifications of welfare conditionality in general and the amendment specifically. After transcription of the interview data, we conducted a thematic content analysis in which themes that could inform our research questions were identified, coded, and so clusters of categories were crystalized (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.1 | Methodological issues

Our study is based on interviews conducted shortly after the implementation of the amendment (only 6 months). This could mean that some of the managers we interviewed had rather few experiences in practicing behavioural conditionality, and thus, their responses could be based on misconceptions and other miscalculations. Future research should undertake similar data gatherings at later stages after the managers have gained more experience with the amendment.

Another methodological issue encumbered with our study is that we cannot be certain about the genuineness of the managers' testimonies in politically sensitive and inflected themes such as our interview queries. Indeed, in an interview situation, informants might desire to respond within socially desirable discourses. However, our research interest has not been to capture their own, genuine opinions in these regards but rather to deepen the understanding of how the managers choose to interpret and justify the policies in question publicly and internally within their organisation.

3.2 | Findings

The broad frontline managers' endorsement (86%) of the ethically controversial conditionality in a street-level organisation staffed with a large number of professional social workers seemed to be a counter-intuitive finding. Furthermore, the notion that only about half of the respondents believed conditionality is an efficient means of getting people into work intrigued us. Thus, the chief aim of the present study is to explore frontline managers' perceptions and justifications of the Norwegian behavioural conditionality.

3.3 | The perception of conditionality

In accordance with the survey findings, the managers were highly supportive of conditionality in general. One informant put it:

We should have faith in people, we should have faith that people can behave appropriately, can achieve things and so we should make demands.

However, there were some differing viewpoints with regards to the necessity of the amendment of the Social Services Act. Whereas some embraced it as a long-awaited legislation, others believed it to be nothing but a minor, insignificant legislative adjustment. As a response to the question of necessity of the amendment one informant said:

Yes, this change should have been made 100 years ago, for everybody of course. I identified this as an issue when I started out as a social worker. I thought to myself, what are we doing? We have to get people into work!

The new amendment was expected to result in more legitimacy for their practice of conditionality. The desired legitimising effect was aimed at several stakeholders, including the municipality authorities (for granting more financial resources for the implementation), claimants themselves, and actors in the health care services, such as psychologists.

Other managers claimed that the amendment was not necessary because they had already implemented mandatory activation for young social assistance claimants:

This was not necessary because it is not a major change, we have just changed the wording from "can" to "shall." I believe that we have always had the opportunity to give people conditional cash transfers.

Despite some diversity in opinion regarding the necessity of the amendment, overall, our informants were supportive.

The Social Services Act does not specify the activity requirements imposed on social assistance recipients. Each municipality has been granted discretionary capacity to make decisions regarding what kinds of activities they want to establish. Frontline managers did prefer enabling-oriented “activity centres” and were resistant to reciprocal elements, such as work in exchange for social assistance. “Activity centres” were perceived as pedagogical arenas wherein the clients would receive assistance in job seeking, CV writing, training for job interviews, and general guidance resembling that of supported living and employment.

They opposed “workfare” due to assumed “lock in” effects, meaning that programme participation may crowd out ordinary job searching. Thus, most of the interviewed managers did not favour activity measures requiring claimants to execute specific work such as litter picking. For some managers, supportive attitudes towards conditionality applied only to the enabling-oriented nature of the activities:

I believe that as long as we have activities and measures that emphasise that, if you join this, then it will make a difference and you will become more competent in escaping the situation you are in, then I think activation is positive.

Some of the managers said that the municipality had established an “activity centre” prior to the amendment of the act, whereas others aspired to doing so. These activity centres were arenas for assisted job searching, learning life skills, and practicing interpersonal interaction skills. Several of the managers' utterances, such as the one below, supported strong pedagogical elements in these arenas:

There is a lot of guidance going on, but also training. Everybody can write a CV, but how does one approach an employer, how does one sell oneself, how does one dress? Should you have snuff under your lips when you ask for a job? Saggy pants, are they cool or not in these contexts?

Another manager said:

...sometimes we arrange courses in different subjects, such as personal finances or elections and political systems. I call it adult education for living. Courses on contemporary issues. Then they [clients and supervisors] gather and have lunch together regularly.

Lack of competency in general life skills seemed to be perceived as a common characteristic of most claimants. With this perception as a fundamental premise, it seems logical that it is the responsibility of the state to facilitate acquisition of these kinds of competencies. Even those who did not believe conditionality to be a particularly effective tool to integrate people into the labour market thought that these types of activities are expedient because many clients were perceived to need long-term assistance before a possible entry into the labour market. They perceived conditionality as benevolent added services and expressed positive attitudes towards conditionality also because it promotes a sense of belonging and affiliation for people. In sum, the data suggested a clear orientation towards what Sabatinelli calls a broad conceptualization of conditionality policies.

Both within and across focus groups, we detected some differing opinions regarding perceptions of the exemption rule, that is, who should not be subject to activity requirements.

Interviewer:

What do you think are typical “weighty reasons” [for exemption]?

Informant:

Major health issues, if you have challenging health issues that prevent you from attending activities.

Likewise, another frontline manager claimed:

Some people don't have day care arrangements for their children, that is a weighty reason. And then there are drug issues, when people have drug issues, they don't have to attend activities.

However, some of the managers believed that activity requirements should apply to everyone:

We have to apply this [activity requirements] to everyone. We just have to find the right measures, the right activity. That is exactly what we should do in order for these people [clients] to get on with their lives.

Overall, the managers' statements conveyed a client-sensitive orientation either in the form of extensive application of the exemption rule or as a pursuit towards differentiated, tailor-made, and individualised activity requirements.

With respect to sanctions, the managers claimed that they make extensive use of mitigation clauses and otherwise act rather cautiously when it comes to sanctioning, meaning that several aspects, both in the general situation of the claimant and the specific violation situation, are considered before a monetary reduction is implemented. The discretionary powers given to the frontline managers often benefit the claimants, that is, in cases of doubt the sanction will not be imposed. Some informants also claimed that the social assistance recipients are given several chances, and sometimes, the sanction will be reversed if the claimants are present at the activity centre the next day, implying extensive use of reparatory clauses. Furthermore, usually the reduction is a rather minimal and insignificant amount of money, as opposed to sanctioning practices in, for instance, the UK, where benefits can be removed indefinitely or for up to 3 years:

We never take away people's rent, nor electricity and we don't reduce the benefit so that they don't have enough money for food.

One of the informants reported that she believed in a reversed arrangement, where those who participated in activities were granted an "encouragement salary" rather than having the benefit reduced in cases of non-participation. When asked whether they believe sanctioning might affect claimants' economic situation in an unfortunate or unreasonable manner, most informants expressed that the scope for discretion and the many mitigation clauses in the legislation allow them to eliminate such aspects:

We make individual assessments in cases that we believe might be indefensible. Then we don't do that [impose sanction]. Then we decide that the claimant can keep the money.

As shown, the data suggested that sanctioning is perceived as an absolute last resort, and there seems to be extensive application of mitigation clauses and a relatively high threshold for sanctioning, suggesting a mild and client-sensitive orientation.

3.4 | Justifications of conditionality

The frontline managers perceive conditionality as an utterly fundamental human right and distance themselves from perspectives that emphasise possible unfortunate, disciplinary, and controlling/coercive aspects of conditionality:

I believe we should make demands on people because they [conditional cash transfers] are simply a human right.

The frontline managers express that it is important to have expectations on clients and that conditionality policies are all about empowerment, caring, and having faith in people. Failure to “make demands” is perceived as tantamount to neglect:

They [conditional cash transfers] are about having expectations on people, about giving people a chance to really show them that there are possibilities out there.

Many of the interviewed managers believed that by forcing clients into activities, they will discover new opportunities for work, networking and socialising with others, as well as developing a sense of belonging. Another said:

I think it is about caring and respect for individuals by showing that we have faith that those people can master something. I don't like the idea of assuming that clients can't succeed. Therefore, making demands on people is about showing that you have respect and faith in them, that is what I think.

In addition, the activities were viewed as having positive effects for the claimants. Informants expressed convictions that participating in various activities is positive for one's health. Furthermore, because they believed isolation and loss of meaning were typical characteristics of young claimants (lack of social networks and gaming on their own throughout nights), the activities would then give claimants a sense of belonging to a social fellowship and, as such, be included in the community. The claimants would experience independence and a sense of achievement. Thus, activating the claimants would give them a boost, and the frontline workers would be able to help them in these arenas:

Participating in activities is good for one's health, being a part of a social fellowship, to achieve things, to experience independence, that is good.

Some informants held that the claimants did not know what was in their own best interests and that they had been self-destructive in their choices throughout life. Thus, their own choices and autonomy could not be counted on. Hence, it is the responsibility of the organisation to make good choices for them (such as conditionality) and help them (in the activity arenas).

They [clients] have just sunk down and down and then they are completely down, and finally they just don't care anymore. When we tell them that they are going to attend some activities and they will be a part of the community in one way or another, then we can lift them up.

Moreover, for some of the informants, activating the claimants was related to a universal respect for human beings. Having expectations and making demands on people were synonymous with believing in them and respecting them. As such, it would almost be an assault to avoid conditionality.

When asked whether there is a reciprocity rationale guiding the conditionality practices, one informant said:

It's not like when you get cash, then you have to do something in return. We do this because we want to find the right help for people.

Other informants claimed that a “something in return” way of thinking often resulted in unfortunate “lock in” effects because clients were set to do community work for their cash benefits instead of focusing on (re)integration into the labour market. Furthermore, the managers did not believe that there are any cost-effectiveness ideas guiding their practices:

The aim has not been to save the budget by scaring people away, it is rather about offering better services.

Another informant said:

Financially, I don't have any expectations of spending more money on the activity requirements, nor do I have any expectations of saving money either. So I believe we have to manage the activity requirements cleverly so that we can create good services, not to scare people away from applying for benefits.

The informants were divided in the perception of the purpose and justification of sanctions. Some reported that sanctions were used to get in contact with the claimants when they neither participated in activities nor answered phone calls.

When we can't get in touch with them at all, they don't show up, don't answer the phone, and not PM, then we assume that they will show up if we stop the money. We wonder whether they are even alive.

The purpose of the sanctions is to get in touch with the clients and force them into presenteeism. The local authorities cannot provide their services when clients are absent. Others perceived sanctions as a tool to teach the young claimants that an action (not participating in activities) leads to consequences (reduction of monetary benefits), clearly resembling a parental approach. As one informant said:

This is a kind of upbringing. That is the most important reason.

Thus, rather than viewing sanctioning as a disciplinary tool, they were believed to operate as a pedagogical tool to shape the claimants' behaviour for their own interest.

Overall, frontline managers seemed convinced that the activities they impose on young social assistance recipients are in their best interest and perceived the activities as a pathway to a working life:

Work is best for individuals and that is where we are going. We have a pronounced job-focus.

4 | DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of this qualitative study suggest that the managers embrace a caring and paternalistic justificatory narrative in defence of what they conceptualise as a broad conditionality, which they perceive as mild, benevolent, and client sensitive. In the following sections, we will offer some explanations for the strong normative support towards conditionality and the robust position of paternalistic justifications. In addition, we situate our findings by arguing that despite similarities with frontline responses from other Anglophone countries, the testimonies provided by our informants differ in some important aspects as a resonance of social democratic values.

4.1 | Broad perception of conditionality

At the very heart of it, conditionality is an exercise of power and social control, with elements of coercion and surveillance (Lukes, 2005; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Although the popular conception of the links between work/activity and physical/psychological well-being are rather uncontroversial, the element of coercion representing a core principle in conditionality policies might appear as somewhat contradictory to social work values. One could expect that these policies would "Cultivate a sense of struggle with the ethical dilemmas of enacting a professional

ethic of social justice or care alongside what they consider to be a policy that is unjust" (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2007).

However, our informants' perceptions of the mild and client-sensitive practical implementation might serve as one possible explanation of the overall normative support. Indeed, one might argue that conditionality is far less provocative, controversial, and ethically troubling in the context of a human resource approach and is a relatively responsive treatment of clients. Whereas evidence regarding the poverty-inducing effects of sanctions are ample in the UK (Oakley, 2014; Reeve, 2017; Wright & Stewart, 2016); there are few reasons to assume comparable conditions in Norway. With reference to our findings, one might even wonder what the actual nature of coercion in the Norwegian conditionality is. We argue that the managers' testimony regarding extensive application of mitigation clauses substantially dampens elements of coercion in a way that profoundly distinguishes the Norwegian model from other Anglosphere countries such as the US and the UK. Indeed, conditionality is not one singular phenomenon (Eichhorst, Kaufmann & Konle-Seidl, 2008), and our results from the Norwegian context in comparison with those from, for instance, Portugal (Eleveld, 2017) and the UK (Wright & Stewart, 2016) represent yet another testimony of the same claim.

The perception of mildness of practical implementation is also related to the broad definition of conditionality we found our informants to adopt. When the purposes of conditionality are empowerment and overarching social inclusion, it is likely to affect implementation practices and vice versa. The amendment of the Social Services Act is not interpreted as a disciplinary device to control and punish the youth but rather as a pedagogical tool to help them into better lives, both with regards to labour market integration and also other forms of social inclusion, evidently in agreement with the holistic, social service orientation embedded in social work values. Thus, for some informants, the purposes of conditionality scopes far beyond a unilateral focus on labour market entry, serving as a possible explanation of the statistical gap, that is, 86% yielded normative support to conditionality, but only 54% believed it to be efficient with respect to labour market entry.

4.2 | Paternalistic justifications of conditionality

Based on the Nordic model with a long history of structural explanations of worklessness, rather than individual explanations (i.e., dependency culture), the managers in our study embrace compulsory activation in order to provide care and an arena for empowerment for their clients. Sanctions are not perceived as disciplinary or punitive. Rather, they are first and foremost considered tools for achieving client presenteeism. When clients are present (i.e., in the activation centres), they are available for social treatment. The idea of social treatment is central to the historical development of the Norwegian social assistance scheme. In his seminal comparative analysis of the development of social assistance in Norway and Britain, Lødemel (1997) argues that, as opposed to the British model, Norway has successfully integrated the two services of "cash and care." Our informants' enthusiasm towards conditionality could be understood in light of this historical notion. Conditionality policies aiming to force clients into activities provide the local authorities with better and additional tools to attend to their mandate and hence provide both income maintenance and social treatment.

The justificatory narratives offered by our informants do not occur in a social vacuum. They are likely to be influenced by broader institutional-cultural contextual features. Hence, policy implementation and justifications of these reflect the basic values of the society and display a valuation of certain ways of life (Bradshaw & Terum, 1997). Justifications, such as economic efficiency and reciprocity, and justice arguments rest upon stigmatising assumptions, such as moral hazard, and therefore do not resonate with the Norwegian egalitarian culture. It would furthermore "count as unacceptably humiliating in any context where there is broad public recognition of structural and non-volitional causes of unemployment" (Eriksen & Molander, 2018, p13). In contrast, caring and paternalistic justifications of conditionality are well suited to Norwegian public discourse. In addition, the ostensible contradiction between the social work ideal of self-determination (Terum et al., 2012) and the apparent willingness of our

informants (most of them social work trained) to assume they know the client's best interest might also be explained by the perception of client sensitivity and the purpose of holistic social inclusion.

We argue that four initial assumptions form the basis for the paternalistic justifications found in our data. First, one must assume that the paternalist considers the supposed passivity and social exclusion as problematic for the individual herself. Internationally, objections to the traditional "passive" welfare state have been wide, ranging from problematic high levels of public expenditures (especially in times of austerity) and unjust policies, to problematic for the individual's overall well-being. The popular conception that work and activities are health promoting as opposed to the potentially harmful effects of passivity is a salient and prominent public discourse in Norway (Eriksen & Molander, 2018). Thus, the problem with the traditional, passive welfare state is primarily depicted as a quandary on the individual level, rather than a problem at a higher community level. The active welfare state then becomes a response to the individual problems generated by the passive welfare state.

Second, the paternalist assumes that the individual does not behave in ways that serve her own interests and thus finds herself in a "persistent misguidedness." She is either oblivious of her own best interests or lacks the motivation to act in pursuit of those interests. In other words, if left to their own devices, people will not make the "right choice" (Standing, 2011). As witnessed by the testimony of our informants, resonating with the findings of Eriksen and Molander (2018), the clients are indeed assumed to lack the awareness of the potential harmful effects of their own passivity and in addition will suffer from a weakness of will problem. Lack of motivation to be active and to work are linked with psychosocial deficits such as poor childhood conditions deprived of adequate socialisation and internalisation of social norms regarding valued ways of life. Rather than attributing out-of-work behaviour to moral hazard, clients are perceived as victims of circumstances.

Closely related to the first assumption, the third assumption is a notion resonating with what Mead calls the tutelary state. The simple premise is that the state is more capable of deciding what is best for those targeted for conditionality. As the claimants are not considered to be competent self-regarding individuals acting in pursuit of their own interests, the state with its extended arms must provide support of several kinds on condition of restrictions on their lives. It is a state responsibility to assist marginalised groups of people to live their lives in accordance with valued ways of life, such as being active and participate in working life. This assumption further rests on the idea that welfare institutions are in possession of adequate means to help clients. It has been noted that the Nordic countries have traditionally tended to emphasise pedagogical measures such as education, rehabilitation, and treatment in order to strengthen social norms and certain values (Bradshaw & Terum, 1997).

Finally, paternalistic justifications are also based on an acceptance or even advocacy of the exercise of coercion, understood as deprivation of liberty of choice. At its very heart is the idea that the end justifies the means. The aforementioned lack of awareness and motivation is to be defeated by means of coercion. As we have shown, the element of coercion may vary substantially between national models of conditionality, and this notion might be the key to understanding the differences between Mead's paternalistic justifications and our informants within a Norwegian context. Although Mead and others (e.g., Dunn, 2014; Perkins, 2016) are prone to accepting harsh sanctions in order to coercively change people's behaviour, the Norwegian welfare state is characterised by careful consideration of poverty prevention, redistributive mechanisms, and liberal egalitarianism that dampen the elements of coercion. In other words, the paternalistic justifications offered by Mead is a defence of a qualitatively different conditionality regime than the one defended by our informants in the present study.

4.3 | Distinctively Norwegian/Nordic frontline responses

The findings of our research reveal several similarities with that of other studies. First of all, the overall positive normative attitudes towards welfare reform largely coincides with studies of frontline responses from a wide range of OECD countries (Caswell & Høybye, 2015; Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010; Austin, Johnson, Chow, Marco & Ketch, 2009; Handler, 2004; Soss et al., 2011). In alignment with other studies, in so far, managers express normative

reservations around welfare reform policy, they are attributed to the repertoire and appropriateness of the activity measures and options, rather than the coercive and potentially harmful nature of welfare conditionality.

In effect, the disciplinary and punitive nature of these policies, albeit to varying degrees depending on the institutional context, are seldom acknowledged by frontline workers and managers. Instead, as demonstrated by our findings as well as other research, frontline staff discursively reframe conditionality by articulating more positively laden terms such as possibilities, help, and care, and as such discard the notion of welfare conditionality being disciplinary and punitive towards marginalised groups of people.

Moreover, in justifying conditionality and sanctioning regimes, frontline staff both in our study as well as other studies predominantly lend support to paternalistic reasoning, thus echoing public justificatory stories articulated by policy documents and politicians responsible for policy reforms. It is indeed the "clients best interests," which dominates staff testimonies in frontline response studies.

Despite the many similarities between our findings and that of other researcher's predominantly within Anglosphere countries, several notable differences appeared.

First, as our study is undertaken in a context where sanctions are shallow in terms of duration and scope, the policy being justified by our informants represents quite a different legal and institutional sanctioning regime. As our review of the legal foundations of the Norwegian social assistance scheme and the testimony of our interviewees reveal, full sanctions are neither legal nor practiced, clearly reassembling a system of universal, non-conditional basic income. Rather, only marginal fractions of the monetary benefits are reduced in cases of noncompliance. Furthermore, given the many mitigation clauses and the extensive usage of them as part of the wide discretionary room in the frontlines, far from all cases of noncompliance is even sanctioned. Thus, the sanctioning regime in our study differs substantially from that of other regimes of full family sanctions, making the justificatory comparisons between our findings and those undertaken in for instance an American context somewhat challenging. Justifying the removal of support to people's basic needs is something quite different than embracing the shallow sanctions in the Norwegian social assistance scheme. Whereas the Anglosphere sanctioning regimes appear rather coercive in terms of limiting client's liberty of choice, the Norwegian social assistance sanctioning regime operates on a more regulatory level, never leaving clients on bare grounds, and in effect less liberty restrictive.

Second, as studies of frontline responses in the United States (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010) and other Western European countries show (Handler, 2004), workers adhere to multiple justifications for welfare conditionality beyond the mere paternalistic reasoning of the client's best interest. Indeed, reasons such as caseload reduction, fraud reduction, deterrence, and fair bargain in return for assistance are all stated rationales for welfare conditionality revealed in studies of workers and managers. In contrast, we did not find these pluralistic rationales in our study. Rather, our informants relied virtually exclusively on paternalistic justifications of welfare conditionality. Even in the face of explicit interview queries regarding caseload reduction, financial savings, and fairness/mutuality arguments, the informants rejected these rationales and maintained their paternalistic testimonies.

Finally, as paternalistic arguments can be framed differently, the articulations found in our study somewhat deviate from those studies undertaken in neoliberal contexts such as the American (Morgen, Acker & Weight, 2010; Lens, 2008; Soss et al., 2011). Indeed, the client's best interest can be understood in quite different manners. Whereas in the American studies reviewed in this article, workers and manager's conceptions of the client's interests reflect the neoliberal values such as individual responsibility, self-discipline, choice, and accountability; in our study, informants emphasise other aspects of client's interest such as health promotion, being a part of a social fellowship and human rights, as a reflection of the social democratic values of egalitarianism, equality, and active citizenry.

Intertwined with being fundamentally rooted in a long tradition of social democratic values, the Norwegian welfare context has long been dominated by social work professional norms valorising a social service orientation in sharp contrast to neoliberal values and thus serving as a possible explanation for the differences in paternalistic framing found in our study and American studies.

Taken together, our findings of the frontline responses revealing a broad definition of conditionality and the specific forms of paternalistic reasoning provide new additions to the justificatory defences previously acknowledged in the conditionality literature. More specifically, the article presents a case for Norwegian exceptionalism in the management of welfare conditionality and as such demonstrates just how deeply embedded paternalism has been in social democratic thinking.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ORCID

Talieh Sadeghi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7863-8552>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Frontline managers in 108 municipalities, a random sample of Norway's 428 municipalities, were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the following statement: "Conditions, activity requirements, and sanctions should be central tools in NLWA." On a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), 86% of the respondents selected values 4 or 5, thus agreeing with the statement.
- ² On the same Likert scale as above, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statement: "Conditions, activity requirements, and sanctions are effective measures to bring people into work." 54% selected values 4 or 5, thus agreeing with the statement.
- ³ Our survey data revealed that 45% of the managers reported having face-to-face interaction with clients when performing activation work. This is especially the case for managers in the smaller offices (fewer than 20 employees).
- ⁴ Paternalism may refer to both a kind of policy approach (e.g., neoliberal paternalism) and to a kind of justification for a given policy (Mestan, 2014, p. 6). In this article, we use the concept referring to the latter, as a justification of welfare conditionality.
- ⁵ Our unpublished survey reveals that the share of trained social workers amongst the municipal local managers is 52%, whereas the share of trained social workers amongst municipal street-level bureaucrats is 62.1%.
- ⁶ The project, Between Income Maintenance and Activation: The legitimacy, implementation and outcomes of social security policies (TREff2), was made possible by grants from the Norwegian Research Council (Welfare, Working Life and Migration program).

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