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Published online: 20 Apr 2022.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dedication to work: social workers in a Norwegian activation work context

Dedikasjon til arbeid: Sosialarbeidere i en norsk aktiveringskontekst

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ABSTRACT

Dedication to work is about enthusiasm for the job and feelings of pride and inspiration from one's work, which is important due to its influence on work performance. We have surveyed dedication to work among 1347 trained social workers and street-level bureaucrats with other educational backgrounds in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. By using the Job Demand–Control–Support model, we examined the relationship between perceived working conditions and dedication to work. The results revealed rather high levels of dedication to work among street-level bureaucrats in an activation work context, and highest among those who most strongly supported welfare conditionality measures. Whereas perceptions of demand were negatively associated with dedication, perceptions of control and support yielded positive relationships, with the latter variable being the most salient predictor of dedication to work. Educational background seems to be less important, and minor differences in the prediction of dedication were found between educational groups.

ABSTRAKT

Dedikasjon til arbeid handler om entusiasme for jobben, samt opplevelse av stolthet og inspirasjon for arbeidet. Dedikasjon er viktig fordi det virker inn på arbeidsprestasjoner. Vi har kartlagt dedikasjon blant 1347 sosialarbeidere og bakkebyråkrater med annen utdanningsbakgrunn ved NAV-kontor i hele Norge. Ved bruk av Krav-kontroll-støtte-modellen undersøkte vi sammenhenger mellom opplevde arbeidsforhold og dedikasjon til arbeid. Resultatene viste relativt høye nivåer av dedikasjon til arbeid blant bakkebyråkratene i en aktiverings-kontekst, og høyest blant de som støttet aktiveringspolitikken sterkest. Mens oppfatninger av høye arbeidskrav var negativt assosiert med dedikasjon, var oppfatninger om stor grad av kontroll og støtte positivt korrelert med dedikasjon. Sistnevnte variabel var den mest fremtredende prediktoren for dedikasjon til arbeid. Utdanningsbakgrunn ser ut til å være mindre viktig, og det ble funnet mindre forskjeller i prediksjon av dedikasjon mellom utdanningsgruppene.

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Introduction

The recent restructuring of human service agencies into leaner organisations has created highly stressful work environments for service professionals, including those doing activation work (Astvik et al., 2014). Excessive workloads, insufficient resources and role conflicts leave workers in these organisations especially vulnerable to job stress, burnout and other negative work outcomes (Coffey et al., 2009). Whereas burnout among human service workers has garnered ample research attention, less focus has been placed on the contrary phenomenon; dedication to work.

Dedication to work is about enthusiasm for the job and feelings of pride and inspiration from one's work. Street-level bureaucrats' dedication to work is an interesting issue due to its influence on work quality (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). In this paper, we aimed to examine the level of dedication to work in an activation work context and to determine the relative influence of perceived working conditions, educational backgrounds and attitudes toward welfare conditionality.

Dedication to work tends to develop in the social context of the workplace (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). By using the Job Demand–Control–Support (JDCS) model as a framework for working conditions, we explore the relationships between perceived job demands, control and social support on one hand, and dedication on the other. Although there are well-documented findings for these associations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), to our knowledge, these have not been examined in an activation work context.

Dedication to work might also be influenced by socialisation in higher education (Lee et al., 2000). As activation work is carried out by street-level bureaucrats with diverse educational backgrounds (Van Berkel & Knies, 2018), a recurrent issue has been the potential impact of educational background on workers' attitudes, orientations and practices (van Berkel, 2017). Although qualified social workers constitute the largest educational group in the context for this study, street-level bureaucrats with other educational backgrounds, such as health care, the social sciences, finance/business and with lower education levels (i.e. no degree beyond upper secondary), are also involved in activation work. In the study at hand, we aim to compare social workers' level of dedication to street-level bureaucrats with other educational backgrounds. The examination of differences in dedication among workers with various educational backgrounds, within the very same work context, represents a novel contribution to the literature.

Furthermore, a wide range of attitudes and orientations might potentially influence dedication to work. Here, we focus on attitudes towards activation policy, more specifically on the demanding and disciplining aspects connected to the use of conditionality and sanctions. An examination of these attitudes could help identify workers' degree of value fit, which is the compatibility between an individual's ethical principles and those of the organisation/policy.

The institutional context

Activation work in NAV

Activation work is the implementation of activation policies, which is a common trend in OECD countries attempting to reduce unemployment. Activation policies have been defined as ' … those programmes and services that are aimed at strengthening the employability, labour-market or social participation of unemployed benefit recipients of working age, usually by combining enforcing/obligatory/disciplining and enabling/supportive measures in varying extents' (Caswell & Larsen, 2017, p. 3). Hence, activation work is 'the complex task of motivating, compelling and assisting marginalised citizens into labour market participation' (Andreassen, 2019, p. 664).

Street-level work in NAV mainly comprises benefit administration and activation work which are inextricably linked (Sadeghi & Terum, 2019). Most welfare benefits, such as unemployment benefits and social assistance, are contingent upon activity requirements. In cases where clients fail to adhere to activity requirements, financial sanctions may be imposed (Terum & Sadeghi, 2021).

Activation work differs between countries in how they balance demanding and enabling measures (Eichhorst et al., 2008). Enabling measures are human capital investments that improve knowledge, skills and employability. Demanding measures regulate individual behaviour by specifying stricter eligibility criteria, activity requirements and sanctions. The activation strategy in Norway is assumed to be relatively enabling, although there are demanding elements, and the sanctioning regime is considered to be relatively mild (Eleveld, 2017), with the extensive use of mitigation clauses (Sadeghi & Terum, 2020). This mildness is also reflected in studies of front-line responses (Gjersøe et al., 2019; Sadeghi & Terum, 2020; Vilhena, 2020). For example, Gjersøe et al. (2019) demonstrated that front-line workers in the Norwegian activation work context assume that people wish to be socially integrated in the society and hence perceive conditionality policies as meaningful service provision. In a similar vein, Sadeghi and Terum (2020) found that front-line managers mainly adopt the broad definition of activation policies, referring to an overall client integration into the society. This mild nature of Norwegian activation policies contrasts starkly with those of other jurisdictions, such as Britain, where sanctions are far more widespread, punitive and even understood to be criminalising in character (Wright et al., 2020).

Social work in Norway

In the Scandinavian countries, trained social workers make up a significant proportion of the front-line workers in activation programmes in contrast to for instance the UK (Millar & Austin, 2006). Norwegian social workers have always been highly involved in the implementation of social assistance in Norway, both as service providers and benefit administrators (Hvinden, 1994). However, street-level work in NAV is not exclusively reserved for social workers. In addition to trained social workers, who comprise approximately one-third of the NAV worker population, there are NAV workers with educational backgrounds in the social sciences, health care and law (Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2019).

In order to become a social worker in Norway, it is required to complete a three-year long bachelor's degree programme in social work at a higher education institution. The Norwegian social work tradition, both as a field of study and a profession, is closely linked to the international professional tradition 'social work' and the professional term 'social worker' (Hutchinson & Weihe, 2021).

Dedication to work

Dedication is one of three dimensions in work engagement, which has been considered the positive antithesis to burnout; dimensions of work engagement have proven to be negatively associated with dimensions of burnout (Halbesleben, 2010). Work engagement might be understood as an interesting outcome in itself, but also for its possible consequences. Previous research indicates that work engagement is positively related to commitment (Hakanen et al., 2006; Halbesleben, 2010), task performance, job performance (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010) and active learning (Bakker et al., 2012), whereas it is negatively related to turnover intentions (Halbesleben, 2010).

Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling and work-related state of mind characterised by dedication, vigour and absorption. Dedication is the dimension which refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, pride and challenge related to one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). In this study, focus will be on dedication, which is understood to be a motivational concept that contributes to front-line workers' behaviour because it reflects their genuine willingness to the invest effort to attain organisational goals or success (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The role of working conditions

Perceived working conditions have been reported to have profound impacts on workers' dedication (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). One of the most frequently utilised models in this strand of research is

the Job Demand–Control-Support (JDCS) model (Karasek, 1979; 1989), attempting to explain the occurrence of mental strain and well-being in the workplace contexts (Johnson et al., 1989).

Job demands

Job demands are operationalised in terms of workload and time pressure (Karasek, 1989). Several studies indicate that an excessive workload can have serious consequences, such as stress and burnout, and may in turn decrease dedication to work (Halbesleben, 2010).

The negative effects of heavy workloads have received some attention in research on activation work (Lee, 2009; Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016). For example, in a Dutch study, high workloads were found to have a negative influence on workers' performance in their attempts to help clients secure work (Van Berkel & Knies, 2016). Similarly, an American study (Jewell & Glaser, 2006) found that high workloads were negatively associated with service quality. Although these studies make valuable contributions, they did not use the JDCS model, and thus, did not consider the potential buffering effects of job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Control

Control is defined as having substantial freedom, independence and discretion in scheduling one's work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In a meta-study, Mauno et al. (2010) found that autonomy contributes to dedication. It has been noted that social workers tend to put greater emphasis on having autonomy at work relative to employees without professional education, and that limited autonomy may affect social workers' dedication (Newell et al., 2009).

In a Norwegian survey, front-line workers in NAV generally reported a high degree of autonomy. However, the probability of reporting decreased autonomy in recent years was slightly higher among social workers (Jessen & Tufte, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, few studies have examined the relationship between autonomy and dedication to work among street-level bureaucrats in an activation work context.

Social support

Dedication tends to develop through a network of colleagues and supervisors (Bakker et al., 2009). Social context renders it possible to form relationships that have valuable resources related to the experience of dedication to work. These relationships can then evolve into so-called helping relationships, also known as social support (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which refers to support from both colleagues and supervisors.

In a meta-study, Mauno et al. (2010) found that social support seems to contribute to dedication, and this result is supported by studies on social workers (Astvik et al., 2014). Previous research also indicates that social workers who receive minimal support from colleagues and/or superiors are more likely to leave their organisation compared with those who do not (Harter & Blacksmith, 2010), and that social support is negatively related to stress among social workers (Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2015).

The role of educational background

In theories of professions, structural-functional perspectives have emphasised that higher education plays a key socialising role in shaping individual beliefs and thereby contributes to the internalisation of values and the development of identity and commitment (Freidson, 2001). This perspective assumes that educational background influences workers' interpretation of the work context and their dedication. For instance, because education in the social sciences, and particularly social

work education, emphasises structural perspectives, it is reasonable to suspect that this background fosters scepticism toward the use of conditionality and sanctions and, in effect, decreases worker dedication.

Implicit in the scholarly debate on the educational backgrounds is a view that social work education is the most relevant background for activation work. However, some research indicates the presence of a tension between the mandatory elements of activation work and the social work ethic (Hasenfeld, 1999; Nothdurfter, 2016). According to Caswell and Larsen (2017), the shift from a passive to a more active welfare approach seems to be consistent with the social work tradition that focuses on individual-level changes that align with people-changing technologies. However, the demanding aspects of activation policies seem to foster an ambivalent attitude towards welfare conditionality among social workers (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015). On the one hand, it is perceived as a tool to get in touch with the clients, which is the necessary condition to be able to follow them up. On the other hand, the use of activity requirements and sanctions represented disciplining elements in welfare conditionality, which was in tension with the service orientation ideal in the social work repertoire (Sadeghi & Terum, 2020).

Although a perceived tension between social work and welfare conditionality might lead to less dedicated social workers, the opposite is also plausible. Because social work is perceived as a helping profession, with an education emphasising care, assistance and the delivery of core public services to marginalised groups, social workers could be expected to be more dedicated to work, than their colleagues are. Relatedly, social workers are expected to have higher levels of public service motivation (PSM) (Vandenabeele, 2011), defined as 'an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily in public organisations' (Perry & Wise, 1990; p. 368), which is assumably positively associated with dedication in social welfare organisations.

Attitudes towards welfare conditionality

It is almost axiomatic in interactional psychology that people are differentially compatible with their jobs. Various person–environment fit indices have been found to predict work engagement (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). For example, research on person–organisation fit that addresses the compatibility between people and organisations suggests that individuals will be most successful in organisations that share their values and goals (Witt & Nye, 1992).

In a similar (albeit more specific) vein, a measure of 'attitude fit' could be the extent to which street-level bureaucrats share the ethical principles and practical implications of welfare conditionality. A gap between workers' and the organisation's attitudes, values and normative judgements might induce moral distress, which occurs when workers are expected to act in a manner that might be contrary to their personal and professional values (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016). One could thereby expect that negative attitudes toward welfare conditionality will contribute to attenuate dedication to work. However, there are examples of studies implying that street-level bureaucrats may remain dedicated to their work despite a lack of congruence between their own beliefs and the policy constraints of their employing organisation (Lipsky, 2010; Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Ulmestig & Marston, 2015).

Methods

Sample

This is a cross-sectional study of street-level bureaucrats at local offices in NAV in 2015. The target population was the approximately 11,000 employees in the 450 NAV offices in Norway. In consultation with the Directorate of Labour and Welfare, we gained access to collect survey data from a selection of these offices. The sample of 113 NAV offices includes small, medium-size and large offices located in various municipalities, from all over the country.

The web-based survey included questions about the participants' educational background, perceptions of working conditions and demographic characteristics. We received responses from 1735 workers (64% response rate), 1347 of whom completed all of the items of interest. The respondents in this sample ranged in age from 23 to 70 years, and 1104 (82%) were women. The gender skewness of this sample most likely reflects the reality that this work sector is profoundly female dominated[1].

Measurements

Dedication is measured using the following three items from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) (Schaufeli et al., 2006): 'I am enthusiastic about my job', 'My job inspires me' and 'I am proud of the work I do'.[2] The respondents rated the items on a seven-point scale (from 0 = not dedicated at all to 6 = strongly dedicated) (a = .9). The UWES-9 is internationally recognised battery and previous research has demonstrated its solid construct validity and other satisfactory psychometric properties (Seppälä et al., 2009).

Job demands, control and support

We measured job demands, control and support using the Swedish Demand–Control–Support Questionnaire (DCSQ) which has been internationally validated across several samples and shown to demonstrate satisfactory psychometric properties (Sanne et al., 2005).

The two items used to measure *job demands* were: 'I have sufficient time for all my work tasks' and 'The effort required to do my work is too great', which were rated on a four-point scale (3 = heavy job demands) (a = .75).

The two items used to measure *control* were: 'I do not have the possibility to decide how to carry out my work', and 'I have the possibility to decide for myself what should be done in my work'. These items were rated on a four-point scale (3 = high control). The reliability estimates for this scale (Cronbach's a) was not satisfactory, which is common for scales with few items. Thus, we examined the inter-item correlation, which was satisfactory (r = .39, p < .001) (Briggs & Cheek, 1986).

The two items used to measure *social support* were: 'If necessary, I can ask my colleagues for help' and 'If necessary, I can ask my immediate superior for help'. These items were rated on a four-point scale (3 = high support). The inter-item correlation was satisfactory (r = .50, p < .001).

Educational background

We constructed a dichotomous variable. Respondents with a bachelor's or master's degree were classified as higher educated, and those with an upper secondary degree as lower educated. Then, higher educated respondents were differentiated after their field of study, including social work, health care, social sciences and administration (finance/law/business, etc.).

Attitude fit: attitudes towards welfare conditionality

We measured attitudes toward welfare conditionality with two items: 'Conditions, activity requirements, sanctions, etc., should be central measures in NAV' and 'Conditions, sanctions, etc., are effective measures to get people employed'. Respondents rated these items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The items were highly correlated (r = .60, p < .01). We used these two items to measure respondents' normative support (what should be?) and their perception of the efficacy of these policies (effective means?). Thus, we interpreted high scores on this short-scale as an indication that respondents perceived welfare conditionality as both just and effective measures.

Control variables

Extraneous variables can potentially produce distortions in observed relationships. In this study, we regarded *age* and *gender* as extraneous variables and included them in the analysis. In addition, we have controlled for *office size* as previous studies have shown that there are significant differences between small, medium-sized and large offices (Aakvik et al., 2014; Fossestøl et al., 2014). To account for any possible distortions related to these variables, we coded age as a continuous variable, gender as female = 0, male = 1, and office size as 0 = small (15 or less workers), 1 = medium (16–40 workers) and 2 = large offices (41 or more workers).

Limitations

There are some methodological limitations inherent in cross-sectional designs, especially regarding causality assessment. Neither competing explanations nor the possibility of gain spirals, which are defined as amplifying loops in which cyclic relationships among constructs build on each other positively over time (Lindsley et al., 1995), can be excluded. For instance, there is evidence that job resources and dedication are mutually reinforcing over time (Salanova et al., 2010).

Results

As shown in Table 1 (see the first column, 'Whole sample'), the level of dedication to work among NAV workers is rather high ($M = 4.9$; $SD = 1.09$). Table 1 also displays values for perceptions of demands ($M = 1.76$; $SD = 0.68$), control ($M = 2.01$; $SD = 0.55$), support ($M = 2.29$; $SD = 0.56$) and attitudes toward welfare conditionality ($M = 2.78$; $SD = 0.84$). We conducted post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test, which indicated that the mean score for social workers' attitudes toward welfare conditionality ($M = 2.67$; $SD = 0.86$) differed significantly from those with lower education ($M = 2.84$; $SD = 0.81$). With respect to perceptions of support, the social workers' mean score ($M = 2.37$; $SD = 0.55$) differed from workers with a social science education ($M = 2.21$; $SD = 0.63$) and workers with lower education ($M = 2.23$; $SD = 0.54$). Despite reaching statistical significance, the differences between the mean scores for these groups were quite small.

To test associations between demand, control, support, attitude fit and dedication to work (when controlled for age and gender), we conducted a linear regression analysis, shown in Table 2 (see the first column in Table 2, Model 3). The results yielded significant relationships between all independent variables and dedication to work for the whole sample. The analysis also revealed that while the most important predictor of NAV workers' dedication is the perception of support at work ($\beta = .240$, $p < .001$), the least powerful predictor is the perception of demands ($\beta = .093$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that dedication to work is less influenced by perceptions of high workloads. Attitude fit had a relatively robust positive relationship with dedication, meaning that those who are highly supportive of welfare conditionality were more dedicated to their work.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for major study variables for whole sample and across educational groups.

Variable (scale)	Whole sample	Social work	Health care	Social sciences	Finance/ adm./law	Lower educated
Dedication (range = 0–6; 0 = low dedication)	4,9 (1,09)	4,82 (1,1)	4,94 (1,0)	4,71 (1,1)	4,8 (1,3)	5,08 (1,0)
Demand (range = 0–3; 0 = low demands)	1,76 (0,68)	1,75 (0,69)	1,80 (0,72)	1,86 (0,69)	1,78 (0,71)	1,75 (0,62)
Control (range = 0–3; 0 = low control)	2,01 (0,55)	2,05 (0,53)	2,04 (0,44)	1,96 (0,57)	2,04 (0,55)	1,96 (0,58)
Support (range = 0–3; 0 = low support)	2,29 (0,56)	2,37 (0,55)	2,34 (0,52)	2,21 (0,63)	2,27 (0,53)	2,23 (0,54)
Attitudes towards activation (range = 0–4, 0 = negative towards activation)	2,78 (0,84)	2,67 (0,86)	2,73 (0,82)	2,85 (0,88)	2,89 (0,78)	2,84 (0,81)

Note. Standard deviations in parenthesis.

Table 2. OLS regression for whole sample and sub-groups with dedication as dependant variable.

		Social work	Health care	Social sciences	Finance/administration/law	Lower education	Whole sample
Model 1	Attitude match	.119** (.032, .221)	−.036 (−.315, .232)	.244** (.109, .415)	.106 (−.082, .380)	.219*** (.119, .323)	.178*** (.139, .250)
	Adjusted R^2	.012	.013	.054	.004	.045	.031
Model 2	Attitude match	.067 (−0.17, .160)	−.086 (−.339, .140)	.211** (.079, .375)	.083 (−.095, .328)	.213*** (.118, .311)	.149*** (.110, .215)
	Demand	−.163*** (−.265, −.085)	−.147 (−.377, .064)	−.119 (−.290, .026)	.011 (−.182, .209)	−.087 (−.194, .009)	−.105*** (−.168, −.061)
	Control	.172*** (.098, .292)	.331** (.175, .763)	.165* (.028, .334)	.286*** (.167, .576)	.235*** (.125, .305)	.191*** (.154, .262)
	Support	.228*** (.156, .352)	.326** (.139, .653)	−.153* (.007, .301)	.273** (.158, .586)	.160** (.061, .262)	.210** (.174, .284)
	Adjusted R^2	.153	.243	.128	.174	.153	.154
Model 3	Attitude match	.075 (−.008, .167)	−.113 (−.376, .113)	.248** (.117, .416)	.080 (−.097, .321)	.211*** (.115, .310)	.149*** (.111, .214)
	Demand	−.144*** (−.244, −.065)	−.140 (−.375, .077)	−.144* (−.315, −.002)	−.009 (−.201, .179)	−.085 (−.191, .013)	−.093*** (−.154, −.049)
	Control	.173*** (.101, .292)	.312** (.131, .754)	.190** (.057, .359)	.245** (.118, .519)	.232*** (.121, .304)	.189*** (.152, .259)
	Support	.251*** (.182, .379)	.348** (.157, .689)	.193* (.044, .345)	.274** (.164, .583)	.171** (.068, .278)	.240*** (.206, .317)
	Gender	−.051 (−.177, .041)	−.169 (−.462, .057)	−.195** (−.348, −.059)	−.155* (−.323, −.007)	.003 (−.088, .093)	−.076** (−.135, −.032)
	Age	.140** (.067, .262)	−.003 (−.290, .297)	.147 (−.000, .356)	.180* (.043, .470)	.037 (−.081, .176)	.167*** (.129, .234)
	Office size	−.076 (−.171, .006)	.078 (−.148, .318)	.028 (−.136, .209)	.124 (−.036, .387)	−.003 (−.091, .086)	−.015 (−.068, .036)
	Adjusted r^2	.176	.243	.161	.226	.147	.183
	N	516	77	195	154	405	1347

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. 95% Confidence intervals in parenthesis (lower, upper). Standardised coefficients.

Table 3. Level of dedication: multiple pairwise comparisons of educational groups.

	Social workers	Health care	Social sciences	Finance/adm./law
Social work (n = 516) (M = 4.82; SD = 1.1) (M_{adj} = 4.83; SE = 0.1)	–	–	–	–
Health care (n = 77) (M = 4.94; SD = 1.0) (M_{adj} = 4.93; SE = 0.2)	M_{diff} = 0.10^{ns} p = .41	–	–	–
Social sciences (n = 195) (M = 4.71; SD = 1.1) (M_{adj} = 4.81; SE = 0.1)	M_{diff} = 0.02^{ns} p = .86	M_{diff} = 0.12^{ns} p = .39	–	–
Finance/adm./law (n = 154) (M = 4.8; SD = 1.3) (M_{adj} = 4.84; SE = 0.1)	M_{diff} = 0.01^{ns} p = .88	M_{diff} = 0.01^{ns} p = .53	M_{diff} = 0.03^{ns} p = .79	–
Lower education (n = 405) (M = 5.08; SD = 1.0) (M_{adj} = 5.00; SE = 0.1))	M_{diff} = 0.18* p = .03	M_{diff} = 0.07^{ns} p = .59	M_{diff} = 0.19* p = .04	M_{diff} = 0.16^{ns} p = 012

Note. M mean, SD standard deviation, M_{adj} adjusted mean (mean estimate controlled for covariates), SE standard error, M_{diff} adjusted mean difference; *statistically significant difference (p < .05); ^{ns}statistically non-significant difference (p > 0.05). Control variables included age, gender, demand, control, support and attitude fit.

We performed a one-way ANCOVA to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the level of dedication to work between the five educational groups, controlling for age, gender, demand, control, support and attitude fit (Table 3). By and large, the analysis revealed mostly similarities between the various groups; however, there were some differences, even after controlling for all other study variables. Those with lower education had the highest dedication score (M_{adj} = 5.0; SE = 0.1), whereas NAV workers with a social science education reported the lowest dedication scores (M_{adj} = 4.81; SE = 0.1). The differences were minor, and thus, the overall analysis showed no significant effect of educational type on the level of dedication after controlling for the other study variables (F(4, 1212) = 1.58, p = .18, partial eta squared = 0.005). However, multiple pairwise comparisons showed significant differences between lower education (adjusted mean = 5.0) and social workers (adjusted mean = 4.83), and lower education and social scientists (adjusted mean = 4.81), suggesting that the few and minor differences found between the groups in this study are probably attributable to educational level rather than the type of education.

Subgroup analyses (see Table 2) of the associations between study variables revealed both similarities and differences among the five groups in the comparison. For all groups, perceptions of control and support influenced dedication, indicating the relative importance of these working conditions. With respect to the perception of demands, only the subgroup analysis for social workers (β = −.144, p < .001) and workers with a social science education (β = .144, p < .05) showed significant relationships with dedication, suggesting that dedication to work for the other groups does not depend on their perceptions of job demands. Attitude fit with conditionality policies was related to dedication only for those with a social science education (β = .248, p < .01) and those with lower education (β = .211, p < .001). Interestingly, this association was not significant for social workers (β = .075, p > .05) when controlling for working conditions (see Table 2, Model 2). Although non-significant, for those with education in health care fields, the relationship was negative (β = −.113, p > .05).

Overall, the two analyses (ANCOVA and OLS regression) suggest that although educational background does not substantially impact NAV workers' dedication, working conditions and attitude fit are relatively powerful predictors of dedication.

Discussions and conclusions

High levels of dedication

In general, the results of this study indicate that front-line workers express high levels of dedication to work, suggesting that much is going well in NAV. Such an uplifting finding was somewhat

unexpected, given the stressful nature of work in human service organisations and the helping professions (Astvik et al., 2014). Indeed, human service organisations and social work are considered high-stress occupations, and this is an internationally recognised problem (Lloyd et al., 2002).

The relatively high rates of dedication reported in this study are inextricably linked to perceptions of job demands, control and support, which are well-documented relationships (Mauno et al., 2010). The street-level bureaucrats in our study reported high job demands, but even higher perceptions of control and support. These findings can be understood in light of the buffer hypothesis (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), postulating that high job control and support attenuate the negative impact of job demands on dedication to work. Therefore, the detrimental effects of heavy workloads previously suggested for activation work contexts (Jewell & Glaser, 2006; Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016; Van Berkel & Knies, 2016) were not reflected in our study when job resources (in accordance with the JDCS model) were considered.

Although activation work has been associated with an increased emphasis on efficiency, single purpose and hierarchical control, it may well be that these changes in public governance are less prominent in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. Indeed, the legal and institutional frameworks of Norwegian activation work differ from those of other countries in several aspects. For example, despite continual legislative reforms that have increased sanctions for welfare recipients, NAV workers still have substantial discretionary powers, which contributes to the perception of high job control.

The one job resource that was most strongly associated with dedication to work in our study was social support. Comprising both colleague support and supervisor support, this resource has been assumed to play a crucial role in dedication, particularly in human service organisations. Indeed, some research has also demonstrated the positive impacts of social support on workers, specifically in the context of activation work (Sadeghi, 2020). The front-line workers in our study reported having high levels of perceived social support. We believe that, to a great extent, the explanation for this finding lies in the Norwegian model of industrial relations, which are characterised by equality, small differences in power between workers and managers and supportive communication techniques (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010). Norwegian workplaces are assumed to be among the best work environments in the world, primarily because of the focus on employee participation, influence and a supportive workplace culture (Bergene & Hansen, 2016; Schramm-Nielsen et al., 2004).

Working conditions are more important than the type of education for workers' dedication

In this study, job characteristics, but not type of education, were relatively robust predictors of dedication to work. Social workers did not differ significantly from the other educational groups in their level of dedication. This outcome indicates that, compared with the educational setting, the workplace seems to be a more important arena of socialisation for the development of workers' dedication. Most previous studies that have found differences in either work engagement or burnout among various professional groups have studied professionals in different work settings (Chiron et al., 2010; Fiabane et al., 2013; Olley, 2003). In the study at hand, we examined workers with different educational backgrounds, but we held the work setting constant. No significant differences in dedication to work between educational groups have been demonstrated. This finding suggests that work characteristics account for the different levels of dedication to work found among the various educational groups in previous studies.

Predictors of dedication: differences between educational groups

Although our analysis of the full group of NAV workers supported the JDCS model, some differences were observed between workers with different educational backgrounds. Whereas the positive

associations between control and support on the one hand, and dedication on the other, were approximately the same across the educational categories, perceptions of demands had differing effects on dedication to work. For social workers and those educated within the social sciences, the perception of demands appeared to be an important predictor of dedication; this was not the case for the other educational groups.

Insufficient resources have been a major topic in research related to social work (Astvik et al., 2014). Ethical awareness is a fundamental part of professional social work, and hence, the ability and commitment to act in accordance with ethical guidelines are crucial aspects of social work. Working in high-stress jobs under the pressure of overwhelming workloads may lead workers to compromise their professional ethics. In turn, such compromises could lead to moral distress and lower dedication (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016). As our analysis has shown, heavy workload for social workers and those educated in the social sciences is associated with weakened dedication to work.

Finally, another striking finding of this study was the lack of a relationship between attitudes toward welfare conditionality and level of dedication among social workers. For workers with a social science education and those with lower education, a relatively strong relationship was observed between attitudes and dedication, but no statistically significant relationship between these variables was identified for our sample of social workers. This finding could be related to the different perceptions of activation policies adopted by NAV workers. As previously suggested, front-line workers may have broad or narrow definitions of activation policies (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013). A broad definition refers to overall social inclusion in which client empowerment is central, whereas the narrow definition refers to a disciplinary and punitive approach (Sabatinelli, 2010). In a recent Norwegian study of front-line managers in NAV (primarily trained social workers), most of the informants perceived Norwegian activation policies as mild and client-sensitive, which is in line with a broad definition (Sadeghi & Terum, 2020). Therefore, it may be that the social workers in our sample had a broad definition of the demanding aspects of activation policies and regarded them as being more compatible with the social work ideology (Caswell & Larsen, 2017). In addition, social workers' possible commitment to client services, public service motivation and the helping role embedded in social work ideology could buffer the adverse impacts of less positive conditionality attitudes on dedication. In other words, it is plausible to assume that social workers' dedication is more influenced by their desire to help clients, rather than their relatively negative attitudes towards conditionality policies. Future studies, analysing a wider range of attitudes could help identify other crucial attitudes for the understanding of street-level bureaucrats' dedication.

Another way to interpret the lack of association between social workers' attitudes and dedication to work is in terms of a possible interaction between attitudes and perceived job characteristics. As the hierarchical analysis showed (Table 2), before taking job characteristics into account, social workers' attitudes toward welfare conditionality significantly influenced dedication to work. This finding suggests that when highly stressful work conditions (high demands, low control and support) prevail, social workers' attitudes toward activation policies influence their dedication to work. These results highlight the paramount importance of job characteristics in explaining dedication among social workers, even overshadowing the associations between attitudes toward welfare conditionality and dedication to work. Therefore, satisfactory job conditions may buffer possible mismatches between workers' attitudes and the organisation's overarching policies. Accordingly, social workers perceive that they have adequate job resources, relative control and support from colleagues and managers, allowing them to maintain high levels of dedication to work and adjust well to tensions between ethical codes of conduct and ostensibly neoliberal policy reforms that emphasise individual responsibility, similar to the process that occurs with activation policies.

The paramount query is whether our findings reflect Hasenfeld's (1999) concern about the possible corruption of ethical norms in social work by activation policies, or provide an example of relative compatibility between social work ideology and the Norwegian type of lenient activation policies, as observers have suggested (Eleveld, 2017; Sadeghi & Terum, 2020). Future research

based on comparative data from various national models could help to clarify this issue. In addition, because of the multidimensionality of activation policies, further analyses of front-line workers' attitudes should include both measures of enabling and demanding policies.

Notes

1. Although we lack information about the actual characteristics of the target population, several other surveys have demonstrated similar gender skewness among front-line workers in NAV (Terum & Sadeghi, 2019; Fossestøl, Breit & Borg, 2016; Fossestøl et al., 2014). In addition, those studies have had age and education distributions like those found in the present study.
2. All scales were constructed by calculating a mean score for the relevant items.

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